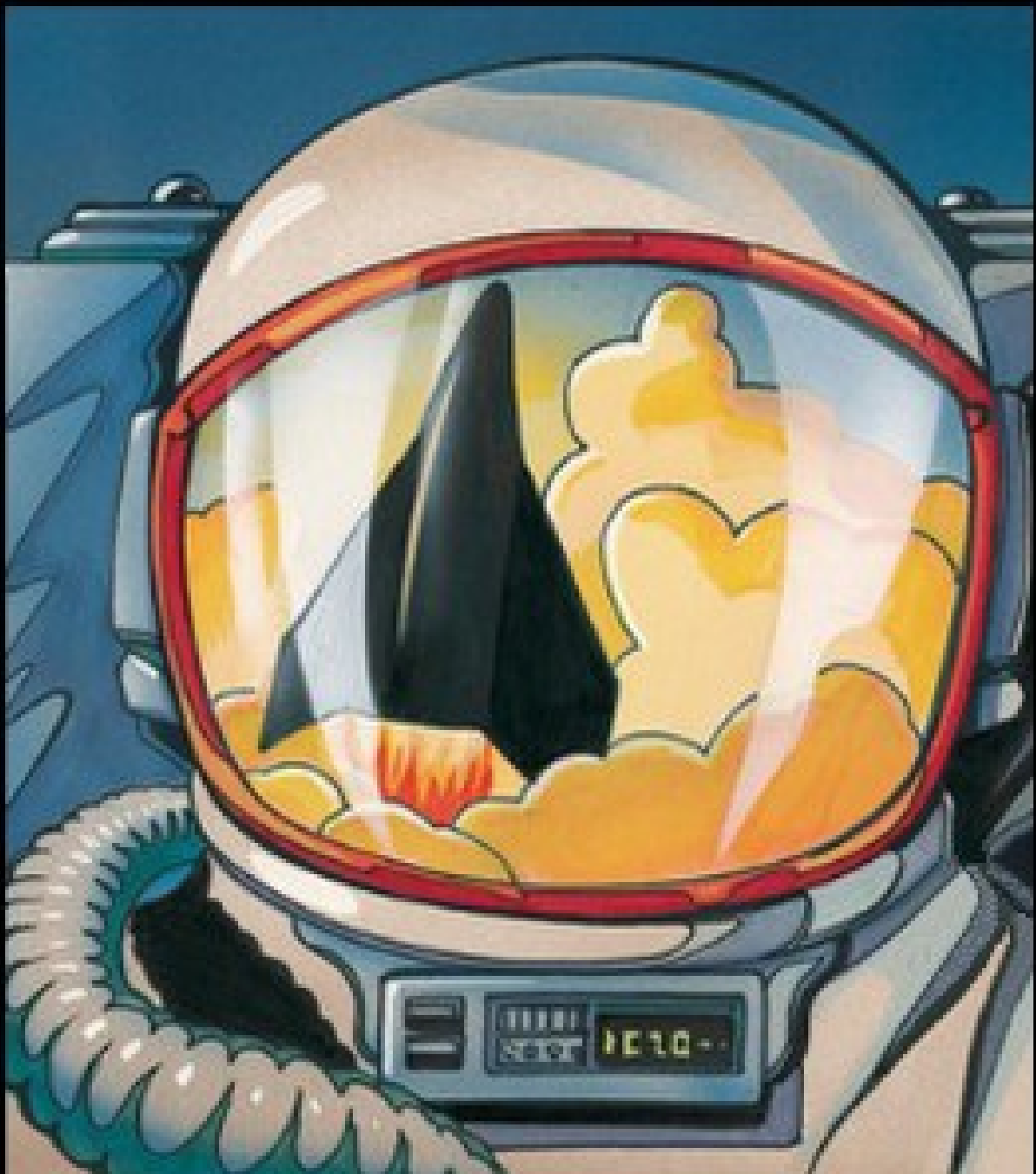


THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE SPACE SHUTTLE MISSION





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
SPACE SHUTTLE MISSION**

Jupiter, Pete and Bob are stuck. Their car breaks down in the middle of the desert and water is running low. The nerves of the three boys are strained to breaking point. Suddenly, a roar breaks the silence as a low-flying aircraft flew over their heads and prepares to land. The Three Investigators draw hope as that could be their salvation. Unaware, they fall into a deadly trap. A maniacal space scientist holds them captive and puts Bob in extreme danger. Can Jupiter and Pete stop Bob from being shot into space?

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Space Shuttle Mission

*Original German text by
Ben Nevis*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ???: Todesflug

(The Three ???: Fatal Flight)

by

Ben Nevis

(2000)

Cover art by

Silvia Christoph

(2020-11-04)

Contents

1. Fifteen
2. Fourteen
3. Thirteen
4. Twelve
5. Eleven
6. Ten
7. Nine
8. Eight
9. Seven
10. Six
11. Five
12. Four
13. Three
14. Two
15. One
16. Zero
17. One
18. Two

1. Fifteen

“Why does this have to happen now?” Pete furiously kicked the fender of the SUV. “The engine is out,” he shouted. “That’s it! We’re finished!”

“Statistically speaking, so much bad luck at once is absolutely unlikely,” Jupiter commented dryly as got out. Deliberately casual, he let the car door close and adjusted his wide-brimmed hat deeper into his forehead to protect against the blinding sun.

“Well then, the journey to the humming mountain is probably over.” Slowly, he stomped across the hot sand to Pete. “Let me see what happened.”

“As if you know better than me!” Pete put his hand on the bonnet, but pulled it back immediately. “Ouch! The heat from the sun! Jupe, help me! We’ll lift the bonnet together.”

Cautiously, Jupiter lent a hand and together they looked at what was considered a marvel in the advertising of the very latest engine technology.

“Piston seizure,” Pete noted.

Jupiter nodded wordlessly. There had been some loud bangs in the engine. Pete’s diagnosis was undoubtedly correct.

“Piston seizure—what does that mean?” Bob asked. He was the third member of The Three Investigators and had remained at the back seat of the SUV until then because the sun was too hot for him outside. Now he got out of the car and joined his friends.

“Piston seizure simply means that we need a lot of luck from now on, otherwise we’ll die of thirst in agony here in the desert.” Jupiter stated seriously. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead, and it was not only because of the sun.

“Oh, Jupe! How can you be so calm!” Bob snapped.

“At least we brought along a mobile phone, and we still have a whole canister of water,” Jupiter pinched his lower lip, deep in thought. “Anyway, the water should last at least two days. Bob, take a look, I think it was a ten-litre canister.”

While Bob went back into the Jeep, Jupiter checked the position of the sun. “West should be there,” he said, pointing to a reddish shimmering range of hills several kilometres away. “If we leave the car here, we could make it to an inhabited area in two days.”

“Without me!” Pete shook his head. “I no longer want to rely on your sense of direction.”

At that moment, Bob cried out loudly. He knelt in the back seat and sat up in horror. Jupiter ran to him and ripped open the passenger door. “What is it, Bob, a scorpion? A spider?”

“Worse, much worse.” Bob’s voice sounded tearful. He carefully lifted a blanket from the back seat. It was soaking wet.

“Oh no!” mumbled Jupiter.

Bob held the water canister and shook it. “It’s as good as empty, fellas! Overturned and leaking!”

Jupiter grabbed the canister from Bob and examined it. Immediately he found the problem—the cap was screwed on wrongly. “Now who was the last person to take a drink from this?” He held out the almost-empty canister.

“Oops!” Pete remarked.

“Hey, fellas!” Bob yelled out. “That’s not our only problem!”

“What now?” Jupe asked.

“Our mobile phone may be gone as well,” Bob said. “It was under the blanket and it is now soaking wet!”

Jupiter grabbed the wet mobile phone, wiped it with a cloth, and fiddled with it. After a while, he announced: “Yeah, it’s gone. It doesn’t work anymore!”

“Hey, Bob!” Pete called out. “You were sitting at the back seat. Didn’t you notice that the water was leaking?”

“I had dozed off,” Bob replied.

Jupiter set about wringing out the wet-sucked blanket carefully over the canister opening as it did not bother him much that the water was no longer completely clean.

When he had finished, he looked inside the canister. “There shouldn’t be more than two litres left in it,” he said in a soundless voice and carefully put back the cap. Then he went around the car, opened the tailgate and stowed the canister between the sleeping bags. “There, now nothing can happen to it.”

“Hey, what are you doing, I need a sip,” Bob shouted and climbed out of the car.

“No!” Jupiter slammed the tailgate forcefully. “This is now emergency ration! Come on, Bob, put your hat on, or you’ll soon look as red in the face as Pete.”

For the Second Investigator, Uncle Titus’s hats had not been fashionable enough and he had only brought along his baseball cap. Depending on how he put it on, the sun was now burning either on his forehead or on his neck. As it was now, both areas had reddened.

“All around us is nothing but dried-up clay, boiling hot sand and absolute solitude!” Bob gasped for breath. “Man, we are in the middle of the desert! We’re lost! A broken-down car! A water-drenched mobile phone! Pete, why didn’t you put the cap back properly on the canister?”

“Don’t waste your energy, Bob,” Jupe placated. “That won’t help us. We’re going to need our strength badly!”

“Our strength? To push the car a hundred kilometres towards the west coast?” Pete interjected. He kicked his foot into the hot sand, raising the dust. “After one kilometre at the latest, we’ll be finished!”

“Okay, I think we should discuss the situation,” Jupe said and adjusted his hat. Like a punching bag, he dropped his heavy body into the narrow strip of shadow cast by the car to the side. While he stared into the plain shimmering from the sun, his brain worked at full speed. He had often found a way out of difficult situations through intensive thinking but today all his thoughts went round in circles.

The Three Investigators were on the road the second day. Nobody would be missing them for a week. They had planned this tour to Nevada, where they wanted to visit a festival for science fiction movies. Jupiter thought about the last night they had spent in a small cheap hotel in Barstow. It all started when a drunk traveller at the hostel told them about a mountain in the desert.

“The strange thing was that the mountain hummed!” The man had shouted so loudly that everyone in the dining room could hear it. “Really hummed, as if it was trembling. And there were flashes of lightning too! You believe me, don’t you?”

The other guests of the small hotel had laughed at him.

“Apart from dead gold miners and their caved-in mountain tunnels, there is nothing left to visit there,” the landlord had finally called out.

Then the man had approached the table of Jupiter, Pete and Bob. “At least you believe me,” he had mumbled. “The mountain hummed. Yes, that’s how it was... or do you think I’m drunk?”

“Certainly not, sir,” Jupiter had said, although he was not quite sure.

When they finally got to their room late in the evening, Bob had suggested taking a shortcut through the Mojave Desert, where the humming mountain should be, according to the man’s account. After all, they had a good off-road vehicle with them, and such a little secret along the route could be worth a little investigation...

Jupiter’s thoughts continued to revolve around the coincidences that had led them to the middle of the desert.

They started off in the morning. During a short stop, the wind had blown away their map. Even when Jupiter was sure that he would find the right way without a map, they had eventually got lost. Shortly after, the engine had failed. Then they had found out that they were short of water and their mobile phone was damaged. To make matters worse, they were now left on dry land. It was a dicey situation.

“If we don’t get in touch with our parents soon, they will be worried,” Pete took the floor and let some sand trickle through his hands. “And they will start looking for us.”

The First Investigator shook his head doubtfully. “I’ve thought about it too. But your parents and also my uncle and aunt are unfortunately used to us hanging around from time to time. As pleasant as it is usually, this time it is different—we are nowhere near Rocky Beach.”

Pete sighed. “I’m afraid you’re right. And even if they miss us, they wouldn’t even know where we are. In fact, we don’t even know exactly where we are.”

“We must be near the old abandoned mines,” Bob thought. “That’s where the humming mountain is.”

“What makes you think so?” Jupiter asked sceptically.

“My sense of direction tells me so...” Bob said calmly. “The description the drunk man gave fits the ridge... And if so, then the man was in this area yesterday. So I don’t think we should give up hope. Maybe another desert tourist will find us or, even better, a mobile beverage vendor. Hmm, water would be great.”

“That would be a possibility—with the desert tourist,” said Jupiter. “But soon, please! Without water, we would die of thirst tomorrow evening, at the latest. In this heat, you need a lot of fluids.”

“Maybe we should start drinking.” Bob could hardly think of anything else to say. “I think you get dizzy at first, then your brain starts to go...”

“We can catch the night dew,” Pete suggested.

“And drink our own urine,” Bob said. “I’ve read how to clean it first in the ground.”

“Yuck!” Pete turned away disgusted. “What kind of books were you reading, Bob?”

“In a few hours at the latest, you will be very grateful to me,” Bob said, somewhat offended. “The first thing you need is a plastic sheet.” He got up.

“There should be some in the back of the car!” Jupiter also got up and stomped with Bob to the back of the SUV. “Let’s try to do something useful. Hanging around is not gonna help.”

Pete stayed seated on the ground. “Unfortunately, I don’t have to pee,” he explained defiantly and immediately continued lamenting: “Why didn’t we just drive on the highway? Bob, now you have your desert adventure! I wish we hadn’t listened to that stupid story about the humming mountain.”

Jupiter, who had just lifted a bundle from the boot, threw it angrily into the sand. “Pete! Shut up,” he shouted. “We are all to blame. Bob smelled a secret, you kill the mobile phone with water and I, uh...”

“You... what?” Pete asked.

"I just thought we could go on without a map..."

"There you go... By the way, what did you pull out of the car, Jupe?" Pete pointed to the bundle that Jupiter had thrown down. "Look, something rolled out. It looks like ..." Pete jumped up. "They're flares!"

"Really!" Jupiter bent down and took the cartridges out of the sand. There was even a flare gun there. "These tools must have been left by your father, Pete, before he lent us the car."

Bob closed the tailgate with a mighty blow. "Perhaps the flares are our hope for salvation!" he exclaimed.

"That would almost be too good to be true," Jupiter said and turned the cartridges in his hand. "Five of them. Actually we might as well sacrifice one right away."

"Set it off now?" Bob asked excitedly.

"I'm for it," Pete answered.

"Very well," said Jupiter. "What colour?"

"Red," Pete suggested.

Carefully Jupiter inserted the cartridge into the flare gun. Then he aimed at the sky and began a countdown. The other two joined in: "... Eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero and fire!"

With a loud whistling sound, the cartridge sped away. The Three Investigators looked at it. The bright light made an arc in the cloudless sky and trailed a tail like a comet. Far too quickly, the flight was over.

"Did anyone notice?" Bob looked around as if he expected hundreds of rescuers coming at them from all sides.

But nothing happened. There was still the shimmering heat and blown up shifting sand dunes. In the distance was the ridge of mountains. Halfway up, a dry salt lake shone. Not a creature was to be seen. It was an oppressive silence. Not a breath of wind. Nothing. The smoke from the flare stood in the sky for a while before it slowly dissipated.

"Where are you," Pete cried into the silence. "Save us!"

2. Fourteen

At that moment, it thundered. It sounded like a distant thunderstorm, but the rumble grew louder very quickly. The boys turned in the direction from which the noise shot towards them.

Almost simultaneously, a shadow flew close above their heads. Frightened, they flinched. A strong gust of air followed, whirling up the sand, accompanied by an indescribable roar. As the sand cloud settled and the sky cleared, The Three Investigators saw how a small, clumsy aircraft made a curve only a few kilometres away. It flew so low over the ground that shortly afterwards, a shifting dune prevented the boys from seeing.

“The military!” Pete shouted as he rubbed the sand out of his eyes.

Bob was still covering his ears. “Tearing through the air with their low-flying aircraft... Unbelievable!”

“But it didn’t have the official Air Force markings to identify the plane.” Jupiter coughed. “Probably some new model they’re testing out. It looked so weird too—larger than ordinary planes, and triangular in shape!”

“Do you think the pilot noticed us?” Pete’s eyes flashed with hope.

But Jupiter brought him back down to earth. “I don’t think so,” he replied. “He was going too fast, although he was flying below the speed of sound otherwise we wouldn’t have heard him. He may have seen us, but he would hardly have recognized our plight.”

“You’re probably right.” Pete nodded and picked up his baseball cap, which the gust of wind had swept off his head. “Almost looked like he landed back there, Jupe.”

Bob also looked in the direction in which the strange plane had disappeared. “He could have missed our flare,” he sighed. “Too bad we didn’t fire it a little later.”

“At least we still have four left,” Pete said with optimism. “We’ll light the next one when it’s a bit darker... so someone could see them better... and maybe the pilot will make a night flight.”

“The best place to shoot next time is from a sand dune.” Jupiter pointed to a mountain of blown-up sand. “I was wanting to go up there anyway. Maybe we can see something from there.”

Bob’s eyes were still glued to the horizon. “It is almost like my computer game,” he muttered. “But then the pilot would have wiped us out.”

“What are you talking about?” Pete asked. “Your computer game? Give it a rest. With you glued in front of the screen, we hardly get to see you anymore. Anyway, it’s a wonder we could talk you into coming here to Nevada.” He noticed Bob’s annoyed look.

“You’re like my parents already,” Bob yapped at him for that. “They’re always bitching about something.”

“Bob, look at me,” explained Jupiter. “Although I do sit in front of the computer from time to time, but I know how to get off.”

Bob just shook his head. “You’re not much better, Jupiter Jones! Anyway, the game I discovered is really exciting. There is a standalone version on CD, but if you go onto the Internet, you can participate in a multi-player version. Also, if you are able to find your way through, you’ll get to hidden levels of the game.”

"It's some kind of secret club, isn't it?" Pete asked.

"Well, it's not easy to join in, and even if you did, a rookie has to slowly work his way up. You start as a defenceless person who is chased by planes, but you can defend yourself with simple means. And if you finally catch a plane, you get a laser weapon. You have to hit three planes to become a pilot yourself. Even then, you only get a really lame propeller plane, which is itself is being hunted."

"By what?" asked Jupiter. "By the fast jet planes?"

Bob nodded. He was at his current favourite topic of discussion. "There are several classes of aircraft. The more aircraft you hit, you reach higher levels of the game where you can get to the more modern machines. There are several thousand players worldwide."

"From rags to riches, ha ha ha!" Pete said. "Always the old principle. And what happens if a plane catches you?"

"Then you're suspended for four weeks and have to start all over again. I know people who have used fake identities to rejoin the game so they don't have to serve the suspension. That's a loophole."

"Completely insane," Pete said. "And you, are you still a propeller plane pilot?"

"Unfortunately I got hit."

Pete smiled. "And now it's wait, wait, and wait..."

"That's probably the only reason he came to Nevada with us," Jupiter said smugly. "But what good does that do for us now? Anyway, the plane that just flew over our heads was not part of this game."

"Still, I'd rather be sitting in front of my computer than be here in the hot sand," Bob said.

"I agree with you on that point!" Pete went back to the car and opened the tailgate. "Let's get back to the question of survival. Let's do something."

"And what's that?" Bob asked with interest.

"Build your pee system," Pete said. "Because I have to pee."

A small spade was also part of the off-road vehicle's equipment and so The Three Investigators could start digging a hole to work in the plastic film. In the heat, every movement was very exhausting. They worked in silence. Similar thoughts went through everyone's mind. It was very unlikely that anyone in this area would see a flare, and the big chance with the plane was unfortunately over.

After a while, they had to stop working. It was just way too hot. Jupiter and Pete sat down in the now much wider shadow of the car. Bob got the backpack with the food supplies from the car and joined them.

"Corned beef, sweet bars, another corned beef..." Package for package he unpacked and put everything next to him in the sand. "Oh, a can of Coke!"

"Wow!" Pete took the can in his hands devoutly. "Funny," he said, looking at Jupiter. "If you're really thirsty, you prefer pure water." He opened it and took a sip. "Too sweet, that stuff! But it's better than nothing!"

They handed the can around. Then they inspected the other supplies and found that they had embarked on the adventure rather haphazardly. Since they weren't hungry, Bob packed the food stuff and handed the backpack to Pete. "You can take this away."

"Okay." Pete got up and went to the back of the car.

Bob closed his eyes and leaned against the car. He looked like he was dreaming. "Maybe somebody will come and pick us up. Even our history teacher would be fine with me..." His voice sounded faint.

Jupiter pretended not to listen. "A cactus!" he thought aloud. "A cactus stores water. Maybe that would be a solution. We have to find some cactuses somewhere."

"Or a helicopter, a fire engine helicopter that will spray us with clear cold water and then rescue us," muttered Bob.

"Occasionally, even in summer, there's a torrential downpour here." Jupiter frowned. "Maybe every hundred years. But they are quite dangerous. One should camp on high ground, otherwise you'll be swept away by the mud."

"Or a car," said Bob thoughtfully, lolling around, "with ice and water and air conditioning. Hey, Jupe, stop tickling me."

"I did not tickle you," Jupe protested.

"Am I dreaming?" Bob wondered.

"I really did not tickle you, Bob."

"Yes, here on the leg..."

"Nonsense!"

"Right there..."

"Don't touch it, Bob!" cried Jupiter suddenly.

Scared, Bob opened his eyes and jumped to his feet.

"A scorpion, Jupe!" he shouted. "Help, it nearly stung me!"

A scorpion lay motionless in the sand, exactly on the spot where Bob had just been sitting. Right next to him was a flat stone in the sand, presumably where the scorpion had hidden.

"Don't move, Bob!" Jupiter approached carefully and looked at the animal, which was playing dead. "That could have been life-threatening," he said. "Good thing he didn't get you!"

A little pale around the nose, Bob stared into the sand. "I'm not going to sit down anymore," he said. "Jupe, flick it away quickly."

The First Investigator got the spade and flicked the scorpion a few metres away. "It can recover from the shock now," said Jupiter. He winked at Bob, who stood there in silence. "Bob? You look so absent-minded..."

"Shh!" Bob put a finger to his lips. "Do you suddenly hear the humming mountain?"

Jupiter looked at him doubtfully.

"Be quiet! Perhaps it's a mirage, Jupe, but I hear something humming..." He looked into the distance. "And now I see something too!"

Jupiter followed his gaze. "A mirage? Goodness, Bob, that is no mirage! There really is a car approaching!" He narrowed his eyes. "Look! Over there. A little cloud of dust. Come on, Pete."

Pete quickly grabbed the flare gun.

"Shoot!" Bob and Jupiter shouted without letting the vehicle out of their sight.

Pete pulled the trigger and a green flare flew into the sky. Jupiter did not look at it for long. He already threw the next flare to Pete. "Fire the next one right after it!"

A yellow comet followed and then Pete shot a blue ball.

The Three Investigators watched spellbound as the approaching car grew bigger and bigger. In the meantime, the sound of the engine could be heard very clearly as the car was heading straight for them.

3. Thirteen

The car slowed down. It stopped about fifty metres away. The Three Investigators stared expectantly at the person sitting behind the wheel of the dark blue Jeep. Only a black silhouette was visible against the light.

"Why isn't anyone getting out?" Pete asked, after the dust had settled long ago and still nothing had happened. "Come on, let's run to that car!"

The Three Investigators set off. At that moment, the driver's door of the car was opened and a man got out. He looked big and heavy, and he had a rifle in his hand.

"Freeze!" he shouted and stood in the sand with his legs apart. "Or you'll be in trouble!" He raised his rifle and pointed it at Pete, who was closest to him.

Pete stopped immediately and raised his hands. "Do not shoot! We need help! Our car broke down!"

Bob also put his hands up. Uncertainly he looked at Jupiter, who had stopped next to him.

Jupiter returned his gaze. "Perhaps the man suspects a trap," he hissed to Bob. "After all, there are three of us."

"What are you doing here?" shouted the man without putting down the rifle.

"Is he mad, Juve?" Bob whispered. "What are we looking for here in the desert? He's acting as if we've invaded his property."

"Well, he wants to know what's going on," Jupiter whispered back. Then he shouted loudly: "Water! We need water! Our car has broken down."

For a short time, nothing happened. Then the man shouted back: "Don't move!"

Without taking his eyes off them, he stepped back and opened the back side door of the car. With one hand he pulled out a large plastic water canister, with the other hand he continued to hold the rifle pointed at The Three Investigators. He set the canister on the sand.

"This should be enough!" he shouted. "And now go away! If you're still here tomorrow, instead of water you'll get some big holes in your bellies!" To back up his threat, he raised his rifle.

"Yes, uh, thanks for the water," cried Pete. "Who are you? Could you give us a lift to the nearest town?" He took a few steps forward.

In a flash, the man raised his rifle and fired. Pete heard the bullet whistle and threw himself in the sand. Jupiter and Bob went after him. A second shot followed that also went right over their heads.

Bob was the first to look up and see the man hurriedly get back into the car, started it, backed up a few metres, turned around and raced away at full throttle.

"I must be dreaming," Bob shouted. He got up and knocked the sand off his shirt.

Jupiter had also straightened up in the meantime. With his hands on his hips, he stared at the car. "I don't believe it," he said. "That was close. We could have been dead!"

"At least we have water now!" Pete went up to the canister. With one hand he carried the canister the man had left behind.

"Ten litres, but that doesn't get us much further... but every drop counts." He put the canister on the sand.

“We really should have a drink,” Jupiter suggested. “We sweated out too much fluid.”

“About time you realized that!” Bob said. “And then we’ll get ready for the night. It’ll be dark in a few hours.”

“No! We will follow the tracks of the car while they are still visible and before the night wind blows them away.” Jupiter said in a tone that made it difficult to argue with. “I can’t imagine the man driving into any city. He didn’t look like a tourist. It was more like a work outfit he was wearing—like he was a mechanic. He must have quarters nearby... Maybe there’s an oasis.”

“Oasis—that sounds good!” Bob had to admit.

They went back to their car and looked for what they wanted to take with them for their walk. Bob spread out a blanket on which Jupiter and Pete packed the food supplies, a flashlight, the mini-pack tent, the sleeping bags and a few other items they would need for the next few hours.

Finally everything was stowed away in two backpacks and Pete had even managed to fasten a few straps around the man’s water canister so that it could be carried on his back rather comfortably. The Three Investigators shared the rest of the water that was in their defective canister. They drank very slowly and enjoyed every drop.

“There, that’s it.” Jupiter finally said. “That was the ration for today.” He looked at his watch. “There should be news soon,” he said and got up to turn on the car radio. He pressed the search button and after a while he found the station from Rocky Beach. “I’m especially curious about the weather report,” he muttered.

After a few beats of music, the radio announcer announced the time and began to read out the messages. “Washington... The unexplained loss of an American news satellite has created an international crisis. After Russia has denied any involvement, China is now suspected to have shot down the satellite. The president has stated that America will not rest until the incident is fully resolved. Los Angeles... The air pollution that has been poisoning —”

“Ha ha ha!” Pete mumbled in between. “They’d better use their satellites to look for us. That would be a useful mission and we could—”

But Jupiter did not let him finish. “Shut up! They’re reporting the local news from Rocky Beach.”

“—Beach. Titus Jones, owner of the local salvage yard and his wife Mathilda have won the Rock ‘n Roll dance competition organized annually by the Foundation for Physical Culture for the residents of Rocky Beach. Sweaty but happy, Mr Jones remarked: ‘Well, we’re not as old as the scrap metal in my salvage yard,’ while his wife accepted the first prize—a rare Elvis record. Other news from Rocky Beach... The thoroughfare—”

“Wow,” cried Jupiter. “No sooner do we go on a journey than my uncle and aunt come on the radio! They have been trying for years to do well in that competition. Now they have done it! They’re gonna be so proud!”

Bob moaned softly. “I wish we were with them! I’d even volunteer to help unload scrap metal if only we could get out of this desert!”

Jupiter pushed him with his arm into the side. “Quiet, Bob!”

“—The weather now... Hardly any change, lots of sun, temperatures rising to 40 degrees Celsius. It’s time for a swim in the sea. This is Al Smith of Radio Rocky Beach. Next up, is a song that is most appropriate...” An old surf song started on the radio.

Jupiter switched it off again. “Damn,” he said. “I’d really like to go for a swim in the sea now. But what else can we do? Let’s go and look for that man. There’ll still be light for two or three hours.”

“Here we go,” Pete said. “Let’s go after the crazy gunslinger. Not a very attractive prospect, actually.”

“I think he was just afraid of us,” Jupiter reassured him. “At least he gave us the water.”

“You’re way too positive about it,” Bob objected. “He wanted us out of here as quickly as possible. He made it very clear what he wanted to do if we were still here tomorrow morning.”

“Sure, shoot holes in our bellies. That was clear. But why does he want to drive us out of here?” Pete wondered. “Does he have something to hide?”

Jupiter shook his head. “Why would that be—out here in the desert?”

“I don’t know either,” Pete said, slightly annoyed. “In the end, I don’t care. As long as this guy has a water source and a phone.”

“Well, let’s go,” said Jupiter.

4. Twelve

The Three Investigators strapped on their backpacks and started walking. The sand slowly turned into a hard, loamy surface. The dark blue Jeep had left clear tracks. Jupiter, who was leading the small group, had little trouble following the tyre tracks. But they made only slow progress. Bob was getting more and more tired. Of all of them, he seemed to be the least able to take the strain.

After more than an hour, they finally reached the area of a dried-up salt lake. Although the sun was approaching the horizon and it would soon be dark, Jupiter suggested they take a break. He met with no resistance and together they drank some water. They were too tired to talk. Not even Pete's sunburn was an issue, although it had been on Jupiter's lips for some time to point out that the design of a fashionable cap would fizzle out completely if no one was there to admire it.

Then they set off again. The tyre tracks led along the salt lake, directly towards the mountain range. After a few steps, Bob stopped. "That could really be the humming mountain," he muttered. "Over there, the rocky outcrop. From the description, it fits."

Jupiter looked up, nodded and then walked on thoughtfully. "If we didn't have other problems, I'd like to solve this mystery too."

"I want water," whined Pete.

Bob was still standing there, staring into the distance as if waiting for the sudden appearance of an apparition. "Look, the sun is setting," he said.

Now Jupiter and Pete also paused. Big and golden, the sun seemed to be glued over the mountain range, but when they looked closely, they could see its movement. More and more, the golden disc disappeared, soon only a tiny remnant was visible. Finally, with a brief green glow, the sun had completely disappeared. All of a sudden, the area in front of them was plunged into a shadow and that gave them an idea of how cold it could get in the desert at night.

While the others were already walking on, Jupiter was still standing there. He seemed to have discovered something. "Hey, Pete, Bob, what's that?" He pointed to the mountain. "There, a little to the right of where the sun just set."

"Looks like a flat rock of sandstone," Pete said.

"No, Pete." Jupiter narrowed his eyes to see better. "The shapes are too smooth for that. That could be a flat building!"

"A building? Here in the desert?" Bob asked.

"Yeah, sure," Jupe said. "What looks like little black eyes could be window openings. Remember what you said earlier, Bob, that there used to be mines around here?"

Bob nodded. "Maybe our man is part of a group of modern treasure hunters, and that's why he wanted to get rid of us."

"You mean somebody struck gold again?" Pete wondered.

"Maybe so, Pete." Jupiter tightened the straps on his backpack. "Maybe something is going on there and the building is occupied. Then there should be water there. In any case, let's take a closer look. The tyre tracks go in that direction as well. I figure it'll take us about an hour to get there."

“When it really comes to gold, no one is to be trifled with,” Pete said.

“We won’t take anything from anyone,” said Jupiter.

With the goal in mind, it went noticeably easier, at least Pete and Jupiter felt that way. Bob felt dizzy. Apparently he had got too much sun. It was a race against the coming night. They had to find a place soon where they could be protected from the dangers of the night.

After a good half hour, they reached the remains of a wire mesh fence. The sand-coloured building was only a hundred metres away and was now clearly visible. It looked uninhabited. The Three Investigators dropped their backpacks. Bob fell into the sand and sat there exhausted while Jupiter and Pete began to examine the fence.

“Seems that there is nothing done to this for years,” the First Investigator thought. “It’s all pretty run-down and rusty. Guess most of the fence is now buried in the sand.”

Pete interrupted him. “Hold on, Jupe. There’s a broken sign stuck there.” He went closer to the piece of metal half buried in the sand. The paint had almost completely flaked off.

“I can make out some letters,” he said. “ASA, NING, ENTR, SPASS, HOT. What does that mean?” Pete asked.

Jupiter had stepped beside him and studied the sign with an important expression.

“‘ASA’, I don’t know. But the rest should read something like ‘WARNING, NO ENTRY, TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT!’” He counted the letters. “Yes, that fits.”

“Do you think this sign is still valid?” Pete asked, a little scared.

“I don’t think we have to be concerned with the former occupiers,” Jupiter said. “From the looks of it, this place has been abandoned.”

In the meantime, dusk had fallen and The Three Investigators decided to approach the strange flat building, but with caution. It was built directly in front of a smooth sandstone wall, which formed the lower part of an elongated ridge of mountains, and the highest was at this point. The dark windows of the building seemed to watch The Three Investigators like black eyes as they approached.

After a few metres, Pete stopped and stared at the building. “It’s creepy how those windows stare right at you.”

“Nonsense!” Jupiter shook his head. “There’s nobody there. No light, no sound, nothing.”

“What if that man is waiting for us in one of the rooms?” Pete asked.

“Pete, we’re in dire straits. We’re dying of thirst.”

Pete followed without comment. Bob trotted after them both, but a few steps later, he stopped and bent down.

Jupiter noticed it and turned around. “Come on, Bob, it’s not far now. You’ll be able to rest soon.”

“No, Jupe, that’s not it,” mumbled Bob. “I think there’s another track here! In the sand here... It’s much wider!” Jupiter and Pete came back a few steps.

“It can’t really come from the dark blue Jeep,” Jupiter said and knelt down. “This is really much wider. Perhaps a truck. But it can’t have been a long time since it drove over here otherwise the wind would have blown the tracks away.”

Pete nodded. “I wonder if it was here to move something... Gold? The tracks are not headed to the building, instead they go towards the rock face. That’s unusual. Shall we take a look?”

“No,” Jupiter decided. “First we’ll examine the building. Later we can take care of those tracks.”

Pete gave in and followed Jupiter. Bob stood up clumsily. Slowly they crept up to the building where nothing seemed to move. From a distance, it looked unfinished, but it was

clear that people had once occupied it. Now the windows had been smashed, sand had blown up and in many small cracks in the concrete, desert plants had grown out slowly to conquer the unnatural foreign body.

"Even from up close, it doesn't look as if anybody has lived here for years," mumbled Jupiter in disappointment. "Let's go inside."

Pete pulled his sleeve. "What about the tyre tracks? And the man with the rifle? We shouldn't be careless just because we're tired and exhausted."

"The man drove past," replied Jupiter. "The tracks aren't running towards the building. And what would he be doing here in this hut? It's all empty and deserted. For us, it's good enough for protection for the night."

In the meantime, Jupiter and Pete had reached a covered, terraced forecourt from which they could enter the interior of the building. There was a steel door hanging loosely from the hinges.

"In here..." Jupiter showed the way. "Here we have a roof over our heads. It may get cold tonight."

Pete again held him back. "Look," he said. "There! On the floor, in the corner."

Jupiter immediately saw what Pete meant. There lay an empty cigarette box, apparently thrown away carelessly.

The First Investigator went over and picked it up to examine it. "It's new," he said slowly. "Not yellowed." Then he held it up to his nose. "It still smells of tobacco." He looked around. "Pete, you were right after all. Someone was here, looking around."

"There you go. Now what?" Pete asked.

"Let's go in the building. Just because someone smokes doesn't mean they're a bad guy. And he's probably long gone by now."

Pete suppressed his fear and nodded. Then he looked around. "Where's Bob?" he asked in a startled voice.

"I don't know. He was behind us a while ago!" Jupiter dropped the cigarette box and ran across the terrace. "I wonder if he's still out there on the sand."

Pete ran after Jupiter. Together they walked a little way back. But there was no sign of Bob.

"Maybe he's already gone into the building," Pete wondered.

"Well, let's go see," Jupe suggested.

They ran back, grabbed their backpacks and hurried over to the steel door which was half open. They could see through the gap to a dark room where Bob must have gone into. Just then, Pete stumbled and slammed against the door.

"The strap," cried Jupiter, "you stepped on the strap of your backpack." He leaned over him. "Are you okay?"

Pete got up, moaning. "I'm all right," he said. "I think I got some bruises. Worse than that, I slammed the door in my face."

"Then we'll just open it again," Jupiter said and pulled the handle. Nothing happened. He pulled harder. "It's stuck," he shouted. "The door's stuck!"

5. Eleven

Bob hadn't noticed that Jupiter had bent down to pick up the packet of cigarettes. Totally exhausted, he had walked on. His thoughts circled incessantly around water and he wanted to go somewhere, sit down, and rest.

After stumbling through the steel door, he found himself in a dark, windowless room. Only through a vent hole fell the last of the twilight. He laboriously pulled out his flashlight and turned it on. The room was completely empty, scraps of wallpaper were hanging from the walls. Sand had blown in through the door and the vent, and dried grass lay around. But something irritated him. He looked around once more. There he saw it—all closed walls. Why was there no other opening to other rooms? He began to examine the walls more closely and was about to sit down when he noticed something.

"Remnants of sand," he murmured. "All sand everywhere, but here." He shone on the ground in front of him. "Everything is swept away here."

Bob knelt down and began to inspect the wall. At that moment, he heard Pete outside slamming against the door. Startled, he dropped the flashlight he had clamped between his teeth to keep his hands free.

The flashlight rolled to the side and threw a beam light diagonally onto the wall. From the light, Bob suddenly noticed a fine line. "Hey!" he shouted. "I think I found a gap."

He was excited, and he moved his hand along the wall. "There must be a secret door here! Come on, Jupe! Pete! Hurry up! I think this is the way into the humming mountain!"

Bob's spirits were lifted and he began feverishly searching for a mechanism to open the door. His hands moved along the floor and then up the wall bit by bit. Suddenly he heard a click. A motor began to whirr. Right in front of him a sliding door moved to one side and revealed a dark opening!

Startled, Bob took a step back. A black outline appeared at the opening. But before Bob could see anything more, a bright lamp flashed up and blinded him.

A resounding laughter rang out. "Well, boys, you wouldn't listen, would you? I warned you!"

Bob winced as he recognized the voice immediately. "The man with the rifle!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I am. I'm afraid you're more persistent than I thought." The light from the lamp wandered around the room.

"Where are the other two?" cried the man.

At that moment, Jupiter and Pete got the front door opened. They barged in, but unfortunately, at a dangerous time.

"Hands up," shouted the man, "and move over to your friend! Now! ... So you brought back my water canister. Bring it along! Move!" He was aiming at Pete, who was so startled he couldn't speak.

Pete lifted up the canister and carried it slowly through the secret opening into a passageway. Jupiter followed him.

Then the man pointed his rifle at Bob, who was standing there rooted to the spot. "Come on, you too! Move it!"

“He’s not well,” Jupiter tried to explain.

The man didn’t care. He pushed Bob through the secret opening. The whitewashed passageway, was in good condition unlike the dilapidated parts of the building. At least the paint on the walls still looked quite fresh, Jupiter thought. He went ahead and tried to orientate himself.

The passageway had to lead directly into the mountain. After a few metres, they reached an electronically secured door. Without taking his eyes off the investigators, the man walked past them and typed a code number on a numeric display. Jupiter recognized the combination from the corner of his eye—‘2-0-5-4’—he memorized it.

The door slid to the side. Apparently they now came into the core area of this underground facility, whatever was supposed to be there. Raising his weapon, the man directed them to move on. The door closed behind them and Jupiter could not get rid of the thought that they had said goodbye to their freedom for a while. He only hoped that it was not forever.

After a short time, the man with the rifle ordered again: “Stop!” They had come to a steel door on the side, which was secured by a heavy bolt. The black letters above the door said ‘Room V’. The man stepped forward and pushed the bolt back.

Jupiter looked to the side. There were no means of escape. Opposite there was another corridor, which led to another steel door.

With a hefty kick, the man pushed the door open and ordered the three boys: “Get in!”

Reluctantly Jupiter, Pete and Bob stumbled into the room. The man pressed the light switch and cold fluorescent light flickered up.

The Three Investigators looked around. They found themselves in a barely furnished, white-painted, almost square room. Since it was underground, it had no windows. In the corner were two simple bunk beds and beside one wall was a man-high pile of computer printouts. There was an old toilet and next to it was a dirty sink.

“You’ll be safe here.” The man smiled. “You asked for it.”

The heavy bolt was pushed forward with a loud scratching sound. The Three Investigators were locked in.

Pete put the water canister next to the bed and sat down for a while. “I’m buying a round, fellas,” he said. “I think we need a drink.”

Bob lay down beside him on the bed. “Man, am I done...” He closed his eyes and held his head.

Pete took out a cup and poured water in it. “Come on, Bob, have a drink.” He helped Bob to a sitting position and leaned him against the wall. Then he handed him the cup.

In the meantime, Jupiter had made his way over to the mountain of paper. “What do you think all this paper is for?” he said, digging through the stacks. He pulled out a sheet. “Numbers, numbers, numbers, even my brain can’t figure this out.” He threw the paper back. “I don’t know what they mean, but they’re not really for digging for gold.”

“Here, have a drink first. Jupe.” Pete handed him a plastic cup. “The whole place has the inviting appearance of a prison cell,” he said.

Jupiter drank the water in quick succession. “Ah, that feels good. Come on, another round.” Jupe sat down next to Pete on the bed.

“Looks like a nuclear bunker in the middle of the desert, but what’s the point?” Jupe remarked. “Who’s supposed to come here?” He enjoyed sliding the water over his tongue. “I never knew water could be such a delicious drink.”

Pete put the cap back on the canister. “How long do you think he’s gonna keep us here?”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “How would I know? Maybe forever?”

"Come on, Juve, don't scare me!" Pete exclaimed.

"I can't give you hope either. We're trapped, and I—"

"What is it?" asked Pete.

"Shh!" whispered Jupiter. "Fellas, we are being watched." He nodded in the direction of the door.

Bob and Pete looked over as unobtrusively as possible. Only now did they notice that the door had a small peephole through which someone could look into the room almost unnoticed. And Jupiter was right—a big eye was staring at them.

Jupiter set himself in motion without taking his eyes off the peephole.

Outside, the latch was pushed to the side. The door opened a gap. "Go on in, Butch," said a man's voice.

The man they knew appeared first. He had the rifle with him again, of course.

"Seems to have grown on him," muttered Bob, who felt a little better after the glass of water.

Then a young man appeared and he was wearing a white coat. Presumably a Mexican, The Three Investigators were able to deduce from his striking facial features and his somewhat darker skin colour. He was perhaps two years older than The Three Investigators and about as tall as Bob. Curious and with an alert eye, he watched the boys, carefully staying behind the man with the rifle.

Then a third man entered the room. He was tall and thin. The grey, slightly wavy hair matched his goat-like beard. His lips smiled thinly and he fixed his eye on the boys. Jupiter sensed immediately that he was not to be trifled with.

With an arrogant movement, the tall man threw his head back. "Nice trio you got there, Butch!" His hand went into his trouser pocket and pulled out a white plastic rectangular bar that Jupiter could not immediately identify. He began to turn it back and forth between his hands. "Excellent work, Butch! Good thing you locked them in here."

Butch smiled proudly and held the rifle a little higher. "No problem, sir."

"Dr Gregstone," the grey-haired man introduced himself. "I am a scientist. You can call me the Doctor of Universal Intelligence." He laughed at what he thought was a great self-introduction. Then his voice became more incisive. "But now, let me ask you—what are you doing here? In the middle of the desert?"

"Nothing, uh," Jupiter stuttered.

"Actually, we were looking—" Pete continued.

"—For water!" interrupted Bob, who had stood up like Jupiter and Pete. "Yes, water."

"Water?" The answer seemed to amuse Gregstone. "Looking for water? Here in the desert? No, no, there is no water here, my friends. Only sand, sun and stars. So who sent you?"

"Nobody," Bob replied truthfully. "We're just passing through."

Pete nodded. "Yes, to Nevada. We took a little shortcut..."

"A shortcut? Through the desert, of all places? You think I'm stupid?" cried the man. "Never dare to insult my intelligence!" He took a deep breath. "Once again, what is your mission?"

Dr Gregstone twisted the plastic object so excitedly in his hands that it accidentally fell to the ground. "Pick it up," he hissed.

The young man in the white coat immediately bent down and picked up the object. Then he hurriedly handed it back to Gregstone.

"So I ask you again," Gregstone continued. "What is your mission here?"

“We really wanted to go to Nevada,” Pete suddenly babbled away. “Really, there’s a movie festival there where the, uh, the new movie by, by this famous director...” His excitement made him forget the name.

The scientist helped. “... *Lea Star*?” he said with relish. “So you wanted to see the new *Lea Star* movie?”

“That’s right,” cried Pete, “and then our car broke down and we were exhausted from thirst...”

“But why drive through the desert when the festival starts today? The highway is ten times faster, and much less dangerous.”

“The humming—” Bob began.

Jupiter looked at him sharply.

“The humming what?” Gregstone asked.

“Nothing.”

“Butch, give them a little help! I don’t want to hear any more of this nonsense!”

“No problem, sir.” Butch started to move and threatened to hit Pete with the butt of his rifle.

“Wait!” Jupiter intervened. “We’ll tell you everything, Dr Gregstone.”

“There you go,” Gregstone said. “Let’s start from the beginning. What are your names?”

“I am Jupiter Jones, this is Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews.”

“So... let’s see if that’s true,” Gregstone said, grinning. “Search them, Butch!”

“No problem, sir.” Butch took a step forward. “Who first?” he asked without a straight face.

The scientist pointed to Jupiter. “That big, cheeky fat one there!”

6. Ten

As ordered, Butch turned to Jupiter who willingly let the man search him.

Pete, who stood next to Jupiter, began to tremble inside. It was probably his turn next and then Butch would sooner or later find his lock pick set which he always carried in his trouser pocket. With it he had already cracked many locks, and the way things looked, he would be able to use it here. But that was not the only thing Pete was worried about. He also feared a new outburst of rage from Gregstone, because such a professional set was not necessarily something that harmless movie festival visitors carried.

Pete tried to assess the situation. At the moment, everyone was paying attention to Jupiter and Butch. As inconspicuously as possible, he reached into his trouser pocket and used his handkerchief to wrap around his lock pick set before taking it out. Then with a pretend sneeze on the handkerchief, he made a quick turn of his body and at the same time used his other hand to grab the lock pick set and slide it into his pants at the back. It went down his right leg and got stuck on his heel just above ground level. Pete realized that if he moved his leg now, it's over. If their captors discover this, Gregstone's suspicion would be confirmed...

Butch had meanwhile made a find on Jupiter. With a triumphant smile, he handed Jupiter's wallet to the scientist. Gregstone stuck his plastic object in his trouser pocket.

"So, what else do we have?" Gregstone took out some money and counted it. "That's not much." Then he fished out a piece of paper. "A wrinkled bus ticket from Rocky Beach..." The scientist let it fall to the ground. "Here's a student ID card, an ancient ticket to a rock concert and finally a picture of a girl... Looks nice, that girl... but will she see you again, fatso? I think not! Ha ha ha ha!" He laughed out loud, and since the young man in the white coat didn't laugh right away, he got a nudge.

Then the scientist got to something that made him pay attention. "Well, well... What do we have here?" he said seriously as he pulled out a card and studied it closely. It said:



"There... I knew it! Investigators!" Gregstone exclaimed. "Your names match, and you are investigators!"

"Investigators?" For the first time, the Mexican spoke. "So they're on to you!"

Dr Gregstone put his arm around the young man's shoulder. "Don't worry, Ramírez, they won't stand in our way. I have everything under control. Right, Butch?"

"No problem, sir!" Butch raised his rifle with a grin.

Apparently, the fun was over now. “Damn!” Gregstone continued. “Why does this have to happen to me now of all times! I’m so close to the finish line!” He looked straight at Jupiter. “I can’t stand investigators! We’ll lock them up here until it’s all over...” the scientist said, “or even longer.” He took a significant break. “But it can’t be a coincidence that you’ve come at this particular time! So once again, who sent you? Who is behind this?”

“Behind what?” Jupiter shook his head. “No, sir, you suspect wrongly. We are not investigators!” Jupiter had spoken firmly and slowly, and the three of them looked at him in surprise for a moment.

The First Investigator had chosen the tactic of playing down their detective business. The scientist was no doubt wary of being discovered for something, and Jupiter didn’t want to make him unnecessarily nervous.

“You see,” Jupiter said, “it’s just a game, sir, a detective game.”

Ramírez and Butch whispered something to each other and the scientist waved his hand to quiet them.

“Of course you’re detectives!” he exclaimed. “It’s written here—on your own card.” He nodded to Butch. “Go on, search the others! See if they’ve got one of these cards on them...”

“Damn,” Pete thought to himself. The lock pick set was still pressed against his heel. With a quick mind, he pulled out his wallet and held it out to Butch. “I’ll give it to Butch willingly,” he said.

Butch handed the wallet to the scientist and then he turned to Bob. Pete was relieved and thought that he was lucky for now, but he stood there as still as a statue.

Bob had his hands up. “I don’t have anything with me,” he said. “My things are in the backpack.”

“Go get it, Ramírez!” Gregstone exclaimed, as he examined Pete’s wallet.

After finding an old cheat sheet for a history paper and a gym membership card, he happily pulled out more business cards of The Three Investigators. “There you go,” he said. “More of these cards...”

Jupiter tried one last time to convince the scientist of their harmlessness. “Dr Gregstone, let us go. We’re not really investigators. We only dream of it... or do you seriously believe that three teenage boys can run a detective agency?” He drew breath to make this argument. Incidentally, this was what many adults thought when doubting the abilities of The Three Investigators.

“That’s just it!” cried Dr Gregstone, waving his plastic object around, which he had pulled out of his pocket again. “The best cover there is!” He looked at the young Mexican who seemed to be hanging on his every word.

“What do you think, Ramírez? It must be a trick. I’m supposed to believe these boys are greenhorns... when in reality, they’re spying on us in cold blood!”

Ramírez nodded obediently.

Jupiter stepped forward. “Dr Gregstone! Wouldn’t it be illogical if we wanted to snoop around here disguised as tourists and then take our business cards with us? We would have to expect a search if we were really up to something. That would be very stupid!”

Gregstone grinned, irritated, but quickly recovered. “My boy, your remark shows that you’re truly not stupid. You may even be very clever. Perhaps the business cards are an even more clever form of camouflage, so that I should think exactly what you just said.” He smiled smugly. “But not with me, boys, not with Gregory Gregstone. I’m always one step ahead. Right, Butch? Always one step ahead.”

Butch raised his rifle. “No problem, sir!”

“Ramírez! Where is the third wallet? Come on, give it to me, I haven’t seen it yet.”

“Yes sir,” Ramírez said and handed over Bob’s wallet to the scientist.

Gregstone opened the wallet with relish. “Aha, a library card—that would fit... surely for his detective research. Of course, here are the business cards again... and a yellowed confirmation that he is a journalist—that’s a good detective cover. What else do you have here—a monthly pass, and a note with a web site address. Hmm... That’s interesting!”

He looked up. “And you say you are harmless tourists! I’ve had enough of this!” Gregstone’s voice became very sharp. He threw Bob’s wallet angrily on the floor in front of him... and a postcard slipped out.

Bob had turned pale. He hadn’t thought about the postcard. Jupiter also stepped restlessly from one foot to the other. Pete looked up at the ceiling. They all knew what would happen now—the story of their alleged harmlessness would finally burst like a balloon.

Gregstone picked up the card and turned it over and read it. It said:

Dear The Three Investigators!

It’s a beautiful summer here at Kings Canyon National Park. It’s a shame you can’t be here. But I wanted to say thank you very much for coming here a second time and helping me convict the poachers. You really are great detectives! Visit me whenever you want and I will show you the secret places of my park...

*Greetings,
Monica.*

Gregstone let the postcard sail to the ground. “Butch, take the water off them! We’ll dry them out... until they finally tell us what they’re doing here.” He pointed at Pete. “Go on, give Butch the canister!”

Pete hesitated. “Sir, uh, I can’t,” he stammered, thinking of the lock pick set that was hanging from his leg. “I got a cramp in my leg from standing all that time, sir.” He reached down with his hand and pretended to massage his leg.

“All right, you do it then, fatso.”

Reluctantly Jupiter went to the water canister and handed it to Butch who accepted it without comment. Then the three disappeared from the room. With a queasy feeling in their stomachs, the detectives heard the heavy bolt being pushed forward from outside.

Gregstone seemed to classify them as dangerous enemies. But Bob thought of the obvious. “Go fill all cups with water before they turn off the tap!” he hissed. “There, in the toilet room!”

Pete bent down, pulled out the lock pick set and stood in front of the peephole. Gregstone and his companions were no longer there. Jupiter and Bob were already filling up all available cups and vessels with water. When they were finished, they held their mouths under the tap one after the other and drank what they could.

Pete waited until they were done. Then he too ran to the tap and quenched his thirst. Suddenly he noticed how the stream became thinner and finally turned into a trickle. The water was turned off. And their supply would not last long.

7. Nine

First of all the water supply had to be brought to safety. Jupiter and Bob crept under the bunk beds and carefully placed the cups filled with water against the wall, so that they remained hidden from the controlling eyes through the peephole at the door.

The First Investigator laboriously pulled himself out again and stood up to his full height. He looked at his hands and shook them. Flurries of dust sailed down.

“Boy, am I full of water,” he said and dropped back onto the bed.

“Ow! Watch it, fatso!” cried Bob, who was still halfway out from the bunk.

“Sorry,” Jupe muttered guiltily. “It’s just my water belly.”

“Water? I thought you are all bacon!” Bob crawled all the way out and lay on the second bed with his face twisted in pain. “It’s all right, pot-belly, it’s not so bad,” he murmured and gave his friend a roguish look. “Pete, what happened to the cramp in your leg?” Bob turned to Pete.

Smiling, Pete lifted his lock pick set into the air. “I was saving this. It was hidden hanging at the bottom of my right leg. If I took even one step, it would have fallen out.”

“Great, Pete!” Jupiter nodded approvingly. “It’s just a pity that it doesn’t help us here. The door is secured from the outside with a bolt.”

Pete sat with them. “Well, our situation is really hopeless. As soon as we have escaped from the desert, we run into these crazy people. Now, we’re running out of water again.”

“You’re a born doomsayer!” Jupiter stroked his belly, which was gurgling happily. “But admittedly, we won’t get far with our supply. Gregstone wants to make us talk by all means. Of course, this does not exactly give us hope for getting out of here.”

Pete moaned. “I feel uneasy about this guy. I think he’s paranoid from the way he brags about his intelligence! I tell you, he’s crazy. And we, of all people, have to run into them.”

“I would have preferred to meet him somewhere else,” Bob said. Nevertheless, he was glad that he was out of the hot desert sun and his dizziness slowly subsided.

“Bob, what do you think is bothering Dr Gregstone that he’s so hostile to visitors?” pondered Jupiter.

“I think he’s looking for gold,” Bob speculated. “I told you I read about old-time gold miners.”

“It’s possible.” Pete scratched his head. “Perhaps he has new methods.” He looked at the door, but everything seemed quiet. “Gregstone doesn’t look like an old gold-digger to me—one with a shovel, a gun and a drunken stare. Perhaps our scientist is a chemist.”

Jupiter looked at Pete attentively. “A good lead, Pete. Maybe it has something to do with that weird plastic object he kept playing with.”

“No, it can’t be!” Bob threw in. “That has nothing to do with chemistry, or at the very most. It was a remote control for a computer.”

“Sure,” Jupiter nodded. “I could have thought of that. Did you notice how he turned the thing around when he got nervous? Other people smoke cigarettes when they’re restless.”

“Then I prefer a gadget like this,” commented Pete dryly. “Keeps the air cleaner.”

Bob looked through the peephole at the door and did not see anything happening. “Well, you’re a super athlete,” he remarked.

“Perhaps he is a modern geologist who lets computer-controlled robots do the searching,” Jupiter said into the silence.

“Who?” Pete asked astonished. “Me?”

“No, of course not you! The scientist!” Jupiter pointed to the mountain of computer printouts. “That could explain that pile of paper...”

He suddenly stopped and listened. Pete and Bob were also silent. Then they all heard it. Almost imperceptibly, the noise had crept into their ears and now it was getting louder. It swelled incessantly, it sounded like a roar that seemed to come from deep within the earth as if a huge vacuum cleaner was sucking something. The noise became stronger and the ground began to tremble. The Three Investigators looked scared.

“The humming mountain,” Pete spoke first. “So it is true after all what the strange man reported in Barstow.” Nervously, he looked around. “But what is it? An earthquake? Everything’s beginning to shake!” He jumped up and looked around for cover. “What... what are we gonna do?”

But Jupiter remained seated. “Don’t panic, Pete. This is not an earthquake. The sound is too even. It sounds more like a machine. Gregstone must be behind it. Maybe it’s a giant drill bit burrowing into the ground.”

“Wait! Our water!” Now it was Bob who jumped up and crawled under the bunk bed where they had put the water cups. It was just in time because the shaking of the ground had caused the cups to move together and threaten to tip over. Bob put them far enough apart.

When he reappeared shortly afterwards, the sound died away just as surprisingly as it had come.

“What’s going on here,” Pete whispered, still pale in the face.

“I’ll admit it’s creepy. But whatever it is, we’ll figure it out.” With one glance, Juve checked the door. Then he spoke softly. “We know Gregstone is planning something, and we have obviously disturbed him. He was talking about something important coming up. And Ramírez also reacted so nervously.”

“He’s in on it,” muttered Pete. “Too bad, the Mexican seemed like a nice guy.”

Bob sat back down on the bed. “He doesn’t seem much older than we are. Maybe a year or two.”

“Hmm... Ramírez...” Jupiter thought. “Did you notice how he jumped when Gregstone lost his remote control?”

Pete nodded. “Sure. I was surprised he put up with that. Gregstone just said ‘pick it up’, and his little lap dog pounced.”

“Yes, the scientist seems to have him in his hands,” Bob agreed.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “Ramírez seems to be the most approachable. Maybe we can convince him we’re not up to anything against Gregstone.”

“True. Cause this Butch is a bubblehead.” Pete coughed. “He’s just stumbling around with the rifle. But how are we gonna get to Ramírez?”

“We must meet him alone... without the scientist’s presence,” said Jupiter. “If we want to know what’s going on, we urgently need to look around a bit. If not down here, then at least outside. For example, I’d like to know where the tyre tracks lead to. Maybe there’s an underground loading dock or something like that. There could be more secret passages.”

Pete smiled. “Well, we could have had all that when we were outside. But you wanted to rush into the building, Juve.”

“The tyre tracks,” Bob muttered absently. He looked up. “I’m glad you pointed that out. You know, the sound of it, the hissing and the shaking... Please don’t think I’m crazy

because of my computer game, but maybe it has something to do with the... well, the plane we saw this afternoon.”

“Why?” Pete asked doubtfully.

“Well, that sounded like a jet engine,” Bob said. “And then there’s the track—the tyre track we found outside. It doesn’t necessarily have to be from a truck as it could be the imprint of an aircraft tyre.”

“Not a bad thought,” Jupiter admitted thoughtfully.

“That was such a strange plane in the first place. So thick, grey, almost triangular, with no markings at all. But why? To carry gold away? Or an experimental aircraft?” Jupiter was pinching his lower lip repeatedly. “To prove Bob’s hunch, we’d have to get outside. Because if it’s a plane, there’ll be three tyre tracks, not two like a truck.”

“That’s right,” Bob agreed. “One tyre each under the left and right wings, the third under the fuselage.” He looked at Jupiter. “We gotta think of something. Maybe there’s another exit here after all. We should take another close look at the room. Toilet, walls, ceiling, floor. We should get rid of that mountain of paper too.”

“You do believe in surprises, don’t you?” Pete expressed his doubt.

“We’ve gotta try, Pete! This whole underground installation is amazing enough,” Suddenly Bob’s voice faded, and he whispered: “Attention fellas, we are being watched again.”

Jupiter, Pete and Bob pretended not to notice. They threw themselves onto the beds and changed the subject to the science fiction movie festival they were planning to attend. Pete talked about *Space Control*, a movie he had already seen in Rocky Beach.

“Great,” Bob took up the thread, “I’d love to be in a trip like that sometime. Go out into space, fly around the earth, visit distant galaxies, aim a laser gun at secret headquarters of underground bad guys...”

“Ask Pete’s father since he works in special effects,” Jupiter suggested.

“Unfortunately, almost everything is simulated on the computer today,” explained Pete.

Bob got up and crept to the door and looked through the peephole. “I think they’re gone,” he whispered. Then he held his finger in front of his mouth as a warning and waved Jupe and Pete over. “Quietly,” he hissed. There were muffled voices to be heard. “They’re across the hall in the other room,” Bob whispered. “I think they’re listening to the news.” He put his ear to the door.

“Now that the Chinese are also complaining about the loss of a satellite, the international crisis is tense,” Bob repeated what he heard. “There is something about a new government in Rome... Now, the weather reports—in the next few days, it will continue to be hot, hot, hot.”

Impatiently Jupiter pushed him aside to listen at the door as well. The radio had been switched off and now they could hear the voices of Gregstone and Ramírez. However, they could only hear a few words here and there.

“... The experiment went well,” the scientist just said.

Ramírez seemed to mention the investigators. “... Better move somewhere else?”

Gregstone answered and his voice grew louder. “... No, no... can’t get out...”

“... The tunnels?” That was Ramírez. Jupe wondered why he spoke so quietly.

Gregstone seemed upset. Anyway, he could be heard clearly now. “Ramírez, it’s locked, and besides, it’s a maze. The boys would never, ever find their way out. Not to mention the fact that they are in danger of collapsing! They’re literally digging their own grave. No, Ramírez, don’t panic... Let them go in! If they do, we’ll be rid of the detective problem in a most gallant manner.” He laughed furiously. “Ramírez, we’re going through with this as planned. Is that clear?”

Ramírez said something the detectives could not understand. Then footsteps were heard, probably Butch's. The Three Investigators ran back and threw themselves on the beds. Just in time, because another eye was already looking down on them. The eye disappeared and Butch seemed to go to Ramírez and Gregstone.

"There you are at last, Butch," they heard Gregstone call out. Then, with a loud thud, the door closed.

"Geez, did you guys get that?" Bob was all excited. "There are tunnels here. So it must be an old gold mine shaft after all."

"But the tunnels are in danger of collapsing," hissed Pete. "You heard it yourself. If you dare go in there, you'll be entering your own grave."

Jupiter raised his hands in appeasement. "Take it easy! One thing seems clear in any case—there must be an entrance to the mine from this room. Ramírez wanted to point this out to Gregstone. We should definitely look for the entrance!"

8. Eight

“There aren’t a lot of options, are there?” With his hands on his hips, Pete strutted across the room and looked around. “If there is a secret exit here, it’s either in the toilet or under the pile of paper. Otherwise, it looks like solid concrete walls.”

Jupiter nodded, waved Bob over and together they began to remove the stacks of paper. They chose the side away from the door, so that their work wouldn’t attract attention. They immediately pushed the computer printouts aside. Meanwhile, Pete stood guard at the door, but there was no sound coming from the room where Gregstone, Ramírez and Butch were in.

After a few minutes of industrious activity, Jupiter breathed a sigh of relief. “There’s a gap here,” he murmured. Hastily he pushed the next stack of paper aside. “Indeed. There’s an opening in the floor.”

Bob bent over him. “But it’s locked,” he said. “Pete, we seem to have some good use for your lock picks after all. There’s a keyhole.”

Pete threw another glance through the peephole, then he deliberately trotted along slowly. “I wouldn’t know why I should open the hatch,” he said. “You heard them. The tunnels are in great danger of collapsing. To enter would be certain death.”

“Or should we die of thirst here?” Jupiter looked at his friend demanding. “Come on, come on. Pick the lock first and then we’ll see... Bob, you watch the peephole.”

Pete took out his set and pulled out the matching lock pick. Slowly he introduced it into the keyhole and began to turn it carefully. In less than a minute, he got the right spot and then there was an audible click. The Second Investigator grinned happily. He grabbed the collapsible handle and pulled. Slowly the hatch lifted. A musty air stream came towards him.

“What’s there?” Bob asked excitedly. Curious, he looked over to his friends.

Jupiter lay down on the floor and looked through the opening. “Nothing,” he said. “It’s a dark hole... Must be quite deep.” He sat up again. “But the tunnel seems to have an exit somewhere. Otherwise, this gentle breeze wouldn’t come out. The best thing is for one of us to go down and find a way out.”

“Why don’t we all just go?” Bob looked at him and asked.

Pete laughed. “Go down there? You’ll never get me in there. I might get buried and suffocate horribly. I’d rather stay here for a while.”

Jupiter nodded. “Basically Pete is right. Probably these old tunnels are really dangerous. No one would come to our rescue. But someone must still go down and at least explore the situation. The other two will wait here to help in case something happens underground.”

“Well, have fun!” Pete lay down on the bed and put his lock picks away neatly. “As I told you, I’m not available for this operation.”

“But it’s your job!” Jupiter looked at him angrily.

“My job? Where does it say that?” Pete argued.

“Nowhere, but—”

“See?”

“But Pete... you’re great at getting us out of situations like this!” Juve argued.

“Unfortunately I have a cramp in my leg today,” Pete claimed and grinned over both ears.

"Me too," Bob hurried to say quickly. He had been in favour of opening the hatch to the mine tunnels, but he didn't want to go in there alone.

"You wimps!" Jupiter grunted. "Okay, then, uh—"

"Then what?" Pete asked.

"Well, then—"

"Who? You—Jupe?" Pete looked at him. "I don't believe it!"

"Nonsense. Bob, you go," Jupe instructed.

"No!" Bob objected.

"You're the one who had the idea with the plane tyre tracks."

"What's that got to do with going into the tunnel?"

"You can find your way out and check your theory for yourself."

"And for that I am now being punished?" Bob argued. "Very nice, Jupe, but no thanks!"

Pete leaned back relaxed. "If you argue much longer, our friend Butch will come and put you both in the tunnel. At least I'll have peace and quiet here."

"Pete is right," said Jupiter. "We are too loud. So Bob, go ahead. I'm too fat for narrow tunnels anyway."

"Too fat! Oh, man!" Bob moaned. He knew someone had to go. If he was careful enough, and if he crept gently... why would the earth collapse at this time? He didn't want to die of thirst here either. "Damn," he said. "What choice do I have?"

"There you go, Bob!" Jupe remarked.

"But only if I get the flashlight," Bob insisted.

"Sure, Bob."

"And only if you dig me up again."

"Sure thing, Bob. Let's do it."

"And the next time, it'll be one of you."

"Sure, Bob."

"Sheesh! All right." Bob ran to the hatch, bent down and looked into the dark hole. Then he picked up one of the stacks of paper, dropped it down the hole, and heard it hit the bottom with a thud. "It's not that deep," Bob said with relief. "Maybe two metres." He straightened up. "And do me a favour."

"Another one?" asked Jupiter.

"Arrange a few stacks of this paper on the bed and cover it with the blanket so that Butch thinks I'm there sleeping when he goes on patrol again."

"Good idea, let's do it."

"And another thing, I'm getting an extra ration of water."

"I was afraid of that," said Jupiter. "Does it have to be that way?"

Pete rolled himself under the bed and pulled out one of the cups. Without a word, he handed it to Bob.

"Very well," said Jupiter.

"You're outvoted anyway," Bob grunted and took a sip. "All right, give me the flashlight, please."

Jupiter gave it to him. "There... Run along now!"

Bob sat on the edge of the opening, took a deep breath and jumped. With a dull thud, he landed on the clayey ground one floor below. He picked himself up. "No harm done," he reported. His voice sounded a little shaky. Then he turned on the flashlight. "It's a dark tunnel—looks pretty old and crumbly."

"Okay. Good luck. Take care of yourself," Jupe said.

“Thanks for that helpful advice. Could have come from my mother. And remember, if anything happens, you’ll have to come and get me.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Oh, one more thing, Juve. Throw down some stacks of paper so it’s easier for me to climb back up.”

“Yeah, sure!” Jupiter replied.

As soon as Bob went off, Pete took a few stacks of the computer printouts and started to arrange them on the bed so that it looked as if a person was sleeping there. Meanwhile Jupiter ran over to the peephole and checked the corridor. Then he proceeded to push some stacks of the paper into the tunnel, closed the hatch, and moved a few stacks of paper to cover it. Finally, he helped Pete shape the stacks of paper on the bed. After a short time, they were finished.

“Hopefully we can still hear from Bob,” said Pete as he sat on the bed after the work was done.

Jupiter rummaged through his backpack until he found his watch. “I hope so.” Looking at the time, he added: “It’s late enough, let’s pretend to be asleep.”

Jupiter switched off the light but left the lamp in the toilet on so that Butch, if he peered through the peephole again, would see three bodies on the beds. So they lay quietly breathing next to each other and waited for Bob’s return.

For a long time, nothing happened. They only heard both their breaths. It was the first break they had on this exciting day. Jupiter grew more and more weary. He thought of the heat of the desert, saw the plane flying the deep curve once more in front of him. It flew and flew in circles. The colours melted into each other and after a short time, he dozed off.

At some point, Pete shook him by the shoulders. “Here we go again,” he hissed excitedly. “Come on, Juve. The humming. It’s back!”

At once, Jupiter was wide awake. Indeed—it was the same sound they had heard earlier. The floor was already beginning to vibrate slightly. “Damn,” Jupiter said and jumped up. “Of all times... Bob is in the tunnel. Vibrations of this magnitude could very well trigger an underground landslide!”

9. Seven

After Bob had jumped into the old gold mine tunnel, he carefully began to grope his way through it. He took out a piece of green chalk that he always carried and on the wooden beams, he marked a question mark and an arrow pointing in the direction he was going. This idea of marking trails with the signature of The Three Investigators had been a practice developed long ago. The colour of the chalk tells the others who made the mark—white was for Jupiter, blue for Pete, and green for Bob.

Along the way, in some places, some debris had already slid in from the sides and some of the supporting beams were hanging broken off into the path. But Bob managed to get through even the narrower parts without any problems.

He reached a junction in the path and chose the direction according to his feeling as to where the exit would be. His journey became more tricky as he encountered several more junctions. The further he got, the more uncertain he became as to whether he was going into the mountain instead of moving towards the dried-up salt lake. He was annoyed that he had let Jupiter and Pete persuade him to climb down here alone. In fact, he never visualized himself to be a hero. He preferred to let Pete go first as he always feared the worst disasters in everything he did.

The next triple junction that Bob saw appearing in front of him looked familiar. In fact, here was also the chalk mark he had left on a beam. Earlier he had chosen the middle of the three tunnels, because the left one was blocked by boulders. It was exactly through this middle one that he had now inexplicably returned to.

“So I should now take the tunnel on the right,” Bob muttered to himself. He looked nervously at his watch. “If I haven’t found anything promising in five minutes, I’m stopping the operation,” he decided. “Hopefully I’ll find my way back.”

Since he had the impression that the light of the flashlight was fading, he switched it off. The tunnel in which he was groping his way forward went a longer distance straight ahead and he could easily glide along the wall for several metres.

Suddenly his hand touched a smooth cool surface. He switched the flashlight on again. At about chest height, there was a metal plate embedded in the wall, and it looked like a small steel door. On its right side was a lever. Bob tried to pull it down, but it was stuck. “It probably hasn’t been used for years,” Bob muttered. With both hands, he grabbed the lever and clung on it with his entire weight.

With a squeaking jerk, Bob managed to push the handle down. Rays of light fell through the resulting gap. Bob waited a moment to see if anything moved on the other side.

When everything remained quiet, he pulled the door open completely. At first, he closed his eyes, blinded. As he got used to the bright light, he saw that he had come to a passageway with whitewashed, bright-lit concrete walls that looked similar to the one Butch led them through. This had to be part of the underground facility.

Bob pushed himself through the opening and let himself down on the other side. His tension rose. He hoped that Butch wasn’t out looking for trouble again. Bob thought about it for a moment and then decided to go to the right side. There he suspected the room where they were being held. Maybe he could get his friends out. Quietly, he proceeded.

He had not yet come far when he stopped in fright. He had reached a glass window that was embedded in the wall at the side. It gave a clear view into a room where there were several computers. A refrigerator was also visible, and on top of it was a coffee machine. Next to it was a table and several chairs. But all this did not interest Bob much at that moment. With his back to him, Dr Gregstone sat and typed wildly on the keyboard of his computer. From time to time, Gregstone let out shouts that could be heard even through the thick glass. What he was doing obviously upset him very much.

Bob bent over to see more closely what was on the computer monitor. Unfortunately, the scientist completely blocked his view.

Suddenly Gregstone jumped up with a loud scream. Furiously, he struck his fist on the table. Then he turned to the side and kicked his chair so hard that it flew across the room. Startled by this uncontrolled outburst of anger, Bob retreated from the window. But that brief moment was enough. He recognized the sign that flashed on the computer monitor for a moment. It was the words 'Master of the Universe'. Bob knew that name. It was the computer game that he had told Jupiter and Pete about.

"Strange! Gregstone is also playing this game," Bob thought to himself as he hurried back down the way he came. Now that could be the reason why Gregstone introduced himself as the 'Doctor of Universal Intelligence'—these were the words Bob could remember. The scientist had to be at a very high level of the game. That sign that was flashing 'Master of the Universe' was for the rocket and spaceship level. Very few players could have made it this far. From this level, the earth was under control. Now only the mastery of the universe followed. That was the object of the game.

Since he was unsure whether Gregstone had noticed him, Bob kept turning around while running. But apparently he was not being followed. In his excitement, Bob hadn't noticed that he had long since passed the steel door through which he had come through.

Suddenly he stopped in surprise. He had reached a second glass wall. And what he saw now amazed him even more than what he had seen earlier.

Startled, but also fascinated, Bob stared through the window. He saw a wide, grey hall of a dimension Bob would not have suspected down here. The walls and also the ceiling were rounded off like a dome. From all sides were huge metal scaffolding. And in the middle of hall, Bob saw the silvery grey plane resting on a long rail that seemed to come out of a wall at an angle. Bob bent down and saw that the rail was on a ramp that rose to the top, led to the ceiling of the hall, and disappeared into a black tube.

Everything looked like something out of a futuristic movie or a fantasy game, but Bob knew that this was not a dream. He recognized the plane immediately. Down here in the hall, it looked much bigger than it did in the afternoon when it flew just over the heads of The Three Investigators.

A couple of bright spotlights illuminated the plane and made its grey hull gleam. Bob thought it was like a small, fat whale, but with wings. So the plane had landed here after all, probably on the dried-up salt lake. Then it must have been driven into the hall through a secret opening in the mountain range, just as he had suspected.

So this was a hangar built especially for the plane, far away in the desert, constructed by a mad scientist who was as inaccessible as the desert itself. But why here? Actually there was only one explanation—because no one was allowed to know about this plane.

Bob noticed that the entry hatch was open for the pilot, but he did not see anybody—not even on the small swinging bridge that led to the hatch from the side. Fascinated, he let his gaze wander along the bulky body of the plane. On its rear tail, he discovered reddish glowing words that said 'Masterplane'.

Suddenly the lights on the wings flashed momentarily. They were reflected on the walls of the underground hall, which shimmered.

Then Bob's eyes fell on two bulging containers that were attached under the wings of the plane. He was almost certain that they had not been mounted on during its earlier flight. It looked like they were going to give the plane more thrust by adding rocket engines. So this plane could operate on rocket propulsion. Wow!

All of a sudden, Bob knew. What he had in front of him was no ordinary airplane. It was a space shuttle! It could be shot out into space along this huge rail and land on Earth like an airplane after its mission. But the space shuttles that Bob knew from television were bigger and more voluminous. This one seemed to be a small model. Now it was clear why the shuttle was mounted on this ramp that was sloping upwards. It served as a launch pad for a journey into space.

Just a few weeks ago, Bob had heard a radio broadcast about a series of experiments to fly into space with magnetic launch pads. But according to the report, these experiments had been abandoned...

He bent down lower to see where the ramp was aiming. Now he could look further into the tube and he could see a small section of the dark, star-studded night sky. For a moment, Bob was immersed in the sight that seemed to draw him in. He had always dreamed of flying into space in such a spacecraft.

Suddenly a soft whirring sound woke him from his contemplation. The bridge on which the astronauts board the shuttle slowly swung back. Bob looked around, but he still couldn't see anybody. Everything seemed to be happening here by magic—probably by an extremely modern invisible hand that was computer-controlled. But where was the person who was controlling it? Gregstone had been busy playing with the computer game. Butch was more in charge of the rough stuff. So it had to be Ramírez...

The roar sounded. Bob now realized that that was the cause of the earthquake-like noise they had heard earlier. The humming mountain was where test runs of the space shuttle were conducted. Was a shuttle launch imminent?

The space shuttle began to vibrate. Bob wondered why there was no smoke coming out of the engines, because the noise level was constantly rising. It now sounded more like an electric machine than a jet engine, and the jarring force of the noise surprised Bob. Masterplane seemed to want to tear itself loose into space. The spacecraft tugged at its mount like a wild dog on a leash, but the steel clamps did not release it.

Bob let out a breath. For far too long he had let himself be distracted by this fascinating spectacle. At any moment, someone could turn up to bring him back to the others. He then decided that it was over with the spying, and he had to retreat urgently.

"Hands up!"

Bob turned around hesitantly. It was Ramírez. Bob had been so immersed in his contemplation that he hadn't heard him. But there the Mexican stood, a few metres away, pointing a gun at him with one hand. Under his other arm was a small brown case, which he was clutching anxiously. It must contain something very valuable.

"Come on! Hands up!" His voice was shrill and he was trembling with nervousness.

Bob knew that nervous people with a gun in their hands tend to act rashly. "Stay calm, Ramírez, very calm," he said, raising his hands slightly. "Nothing is going to happen. You have everything under control."

When Bob saw that Ramírez was clumsy with his thumb fiddling with the safety lever of the gun, but hadn't killed him yet, he ran off on a sudden impulse. He heard Ramírez drop the case and started the pursuit.

After a few seconds, Bob had reached the small steel door through which was the old gold mine tunnels. He opened it and pushed himself through. Just as he got to the other side, Ramírez's gun appeared in the opening. In spite of the darkness, Bob ran immediately. After a few steps, he hit a wall and stumbled. He pulled out his flashlight, turned it on and ran on. Maybe the lead would be enough to leave his pursuer in the dark.

But Ramírez was agile. When Bob looked over his shoulder, the Mexican already jumped into the tunnel. Bob kept running. He reached a junction and without a second thought he ran into the left tunnel. He immediately began to doubt whether he had gone the right way.

The humming of the shuttle became louder and louder and overlaid the sound of the steps behind him. Bob looked back again. Ramírez was close behind him and now had a close look at him on the straight. Bob was exactly in the line of fire.

"Stand still," cried Ramírez breathlessly, almost pleading. "I must not let you go! Stop at once or I'll shoot!"

Bob kept on sprinting. Again he reached another junction he didn't know existed. Suddenly the tunnel narrowed. The earth had slipped down on both sides, leaving only a narrow opening. If he couldn't pass through it, it was over as Ramírez would have caught up with him.

Bob squeezed through the hole head first. He was no longer paying attention to the fact that these tunnels were in danger of collapsing. The crucial thing was that the tunnel on the other side was not a dead end. Bob worked with his hands and feet. Just in time, he could pull his legs through the gap.

Ramírez had already arrived at the bottleneck. When the Mexican also crawled into the opening shortly afterwards, a shot was fired. Bob heard the bullet whiz past his head. With a muffled sound, it hit the top of the tunnel just above him. Bob shone a light and was startled. He was standing in front of a wall. The tunnel was closed. He was trapped!

Behind him he heard Ramírez panting. Somehow his legs seemed to have got stuck in the narrow opening and couldn't get any further. From the walls, sand was sliding towards him. Probably the landslide had been triggered by the gunshot or the vibrations from the shuttle. Anyway, the walls didn't hold anymore, earth came down, then debris slid down and as if in slow motion the dangerous mix flowed towards Ramírez who was still stuck at the narrow opening.

Bob stared in horror at what was happening in the light of his flashlight. The earth avalanche already covered the Mexican's legs. Bob illuminated the wall, from which another burst of earth was just coming loose with a rumble. In an instant, Ramírez was covered up to his waist. Desperately he tried to shovel the sand away with his bare hands. But he couldn't fight the debris that kept flowing in.

Bob immediately realized that if he didn't do something, Ramírez would be buried. He closed his eyes for a moment. Then he put the flashlight on the floor with determination. On all fours, he crawled up to Ramírez and offered him his hand. The Mexican grabbed it with both hands and Bob pulled with all his might. The dust that was thrown up took away his vision and stung his eyes.

"Tighten your muscles," he coughed. "Or I'll dislocate your arms!" Bob pulled harder and harder. With one great big tug, he finally got the Mexican free. Bob grabbed him under his arms and dragged him a little further, so that they were safe from the falling debris for the time being.

Ramírez moaned and held his leg. "That was close," he coughed. "Thank you."

Bob didn't know what to say. He had acted at the spur of the moment and saved Ramírez, who was also his pursuer after all.

“We’re not out of here yet,” Bob said. “Even if the earth isn’t slipping any more, we’ve got a lot of work to do if we want to get out of here alive.”

10. Six

When the dust had settled a little, Bob got up. Without knowing, his head hit the top of the tunnel and sand trickled down.

"Careful," hissed Ramírez, who was lying on the ground with his back against the wall.

"Yes, yes." Bob turned on his flashlight and kept fumbling around. They didn't have much room left. And then on one side, just over a metre away, the tunnel ended. And on the other side, where they'd come from, a landslide had blocked the tunnel. The rubble reached almost to the place where they were sitting.

Desperately Bob removed a few chunks, but the earth seemed to be moving again. Just in time, Bob pulled his foot to the side, otherwise a rock that had come loose from the wall would have hit him. So Bob gave up and sat down next to Ramírez, who carefully pressed his leg around.

"I don't think anything's broken," he said, looking at Bob. "As I squeezed through the gap, a beam slid down and fell on my leg. That's when the shot went off. I didn't mean to shoot at you." He faltered as if he was thinking about it, and then he went on quietly, "Well, thank you anyway. Greg was the only one who had ever helped me. And it counts for a lot with you, because if you hadn't, you would have finally got rid of me."

Bob nodded. "Now we must stick together," he said. "Otherwise we'll have more trouble."

Bob looked at the pale light from his flashlight. "I better turn my flashlight off to save the battery. There's nothing much to see with this little space we are in. It's really cramped down here."

They held their peace. Suddenly Bob felt claustrophobic. He was getting hot. He compulsively tried to think of something else and looked intensely into the darkness.

"Let's hope there's enough air," Ramírez said after a while. "At some point, we'll poison ourselves by breathing the same air in and out."

"Poison?" Bob asked and sat up straight.

"Yes," Ramírez replied quietly. "The place is completely sealed, isn't it? And it's not very big either."

"Hmm," Bob grabbed the flashlight and shone at the walls a second time. He couldn't find a hole. "How long do you think the air will hold?"

"An hour or two? I don't know," Ramírez moaned and held his leg. "I read about this once. It happened in submarines if they remain underwater for a long time and didn't come back up. The people might be breathing normally, but imperceptibly the oxygen in the air diminishes and then..."

"Then what?"

"Then you get tired and tired until you..."

"So we have to breathe easier," Bob said, "and not exert ourselves too much." He had to yawn, but he was scared about it. "Let's talk about something else," he suggested to distract himself from his dark thoughts. "Why did you start the engines of the space shuttle? The tunnel probably collapsed due to the vibrations."

“Trial runs,” Ramírez replied. “It’s on a new type of drive. It’s simply brilliant together with the jet engine. Greg developed it.”

“How does the system work?” Bob quickly asked.

Ramírez hesitated, but then gave in. “It’s a new starting procedure,” he said. “The spacecraft is ejected by strong magnetic fields and only when it’s outside does the rocket engine start. So you can do without the big and dangerous solid rockets and make the spacecraft smaller and more manageable.”

Bob’s thoughts wandered back to their hopeless situation. “Do you know your way around these old tunnels?” he asked.

“No, not at all. I’ve never been in here before. They’re dangerous old gold mining tunnels and they haven’t brought luck to the gold seekers. Most of them hardly found anything, except their own death—mainly caused by landslides.” The young Mexican laughed desperately.

“Don’t I find that funny.” Bob suppressed another yawn and forced himself to get some more news out of Ramírez. “And upstairs, these newly built concrete corridors?” he asked. “What’s this about?”

“You really don’t know? I thought you’re here to spy on us?”

Bob shook his head. “No, Ramírez. Dr Gregstone suspects us without reason. We really are not doing a job for anyone. We just happened to be here.” Ramírez was silent and Bob went on talking. “But since we were captured, we’ve become curious,” he admitted. “And maybe you can explain some things to me. Did the scientist build this underground launch site?”

“No,” Ramírez said with hesitation. “NASA installed everything here,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “This mountain seemed suitable to them—far away, far in the desert, just the thing for a top-secret project. But then when another government came along and there was no interest or no money for this project, they just left everything.”

“And Gregstone found out about this?”

“He worked with us then.”

“Oh, he’s with NASA?”

“He was,” said Ramírez. A trace of anger was now audible in his voice. “You’re clearly too curious!”

“And now that he’s not with NASA anymore, is he still in touch with his old colleagues?”

“Not anymore.” Ramírez forced himself to stay calm. “They didn’t want to talk to him for a long time.”

“No wonder.”

“Why?”

“Somehow, as I can tell, Dr Gregstone messes up with everyone.”

“Except with me,” Ramírez said defiantly.

Bob was silent. “When will you be missed?” he asked. “Somebody ought to be looking for us by now.”

Ramírez tried to sit down differently and moaned softly. “Ow! I hope it’s soon, Bob. Greg will send Butch to look for me. If Butch is half-intelligent, he’ll notice that the steel door in the passageway is ajar. He’ll conclude that I’ve gone into the tunnel.”

Bob had his own opinion about Butch’s intelligence, but he was silent on the subject. In any case, he wanted to get out of here. For that, he would even accept being dug up by Butch.

“Butch won’t hurt you,” Ramírez continued, as if he sensed Bob’s thoughts. “After all, you saved me. I’m going to tell Greg. He won’t do more than lock you up.”

Again Bob felt a strong need to yawn. Were these the first signs of the gradual poisoning? “How much time do you think has passed?” he asked in a fragile voice. “Are you getting tired as well?”

“A little,” Ramírez admitted.

Bob turned on the flashlight and stood up. “I’m gonna start digging,” he said determinedly. “It’s better than sitting around here doing nothing.”

“No! If you touch this stuff, it’ll collapse all over us. You noticed that earlier!”

Bob was staring at the earth’s intrusion. “This earth!” he yelled. He clenched his fists. “I’m afraid you’re right,” he said more calmly. He sat down again next to Ramírez. “Still, there must be a way. Maybe we can dig an air hole.”

“Better not wait until the last moment when there is no other option,” Ramírez said. “But tell me, how did you get into these tunnels in the first place?”

“Through the floor hatch. It was much harder to find your way down here. Actually, I was looking for an exit to the outside.” He coughed. The sand slide had caused a lot of dust to enter his lungs. “It was an attempt to escape. Instead, I ended up in your facility.”

“Indeed,” Ramírez laughed for a second. “At first, I thought I was seeing a ghost.”

“Is there anyone else in this facility besides you three?” Bob asked.

“No, just Greg, Butch and me.”

“And this Butch, the scientist brought him from NASA too?”

“Yes. He was in charge of IT there. He installed the computers, printed out lists and stuff.”

“I see.” Bob was thinking. The time was right to interrogate Ramírez. “And now the scientist is continuing his experiments on his own account,” he continued probing.

“Now leave him alone,” Ramírez said irritably. “He’s... he’s brilliant. I admire him.”

“Now don’t get so upset right away,” Bob replied quietly. “But if he’s so smart, he could’ve stayed at NASA...”

“NASA was just hindering him in his work. They’re all far too stubborn for a man of his ingenuity. None of them could do anything with his ideas. When he left NASA, they even monitored him secretly.”

Bob shook his head. “People who threaten and imprison innocent boys with guns aren’t exactly clean,” he said. “It is pretty obvious that Gregstone is up to something.” Again he had to cough. “Ramírez, why are you so devoted to this guy?”

“Oh!” Ramírez pushed him angrily to the side. “What do you know about him?”

“He’s using you, Ramírez!”

“No! No!” He sounded defiant. “He saved me. You know, I came across the border from Mexico illegally. An army patrol picked me up and took me to their quarters. It was there that Greg discovered me and realized that I was a computer nerd. So they left me with him, even without a residence permit. And when they tried to kick me out, back when they fired Greg, he adopted me so I could stay in America.”

“And so he had you in his hand... and you still eat out of it today. It’s about time you got rid of him!”

“Well, you’re right a bit. Sometimes he really bosses me around,” Ramírez admitted.

“You see—” Bob began but stopped. “Wait, what was that?”

Ramírez also listened up. There was a short slide, and then it was quiet again. They stared into the darkness. Silently, dust settled on their faces. “Something’s coming up again,” Ramírez said soundlessly.

Bob thought of the spacecraft with which one could so easily fly out of the mountain and leave everything behind. “The shuttle...” he asked, “what kind of a secret does it hold? What

is to be transported into space with it? And who's gonna fly it? Gregstone?"

"I'll fly it," Ramírez replied. "Greg has never left Earth. I did once. It was wonderful." His voice became dreamy. "The endless space, the expanse—the exact opposite of here."

"I'd like to experience that too," Bob said. "So far I've only seen this kind of thing in computer games and science fiction movies."

"Well, first you have to do a lot of tests," Ramírez said. "And know your way around the spacecraft. It's a lot different to sitting at your computer."

"Ramírez, if we get out of here alive, will you show me the spacecraft?"

"The shuttle? Yes, hopefully that'll work."

They remained silent, anxiously watching to see if they heard a sound again.

"And what is the mission of the flight?" Bob then asked. "What's his assignment?"

"I can't tell you that. It's Greg's secret."

"Ramírez, we may never get out of here alive and you still won't tell me what Gregstone is up to. It wouldn't make any difference, would it? That brown case, for example, what's in it? Is it supposed to go on the shuttle and be shot into space?"

"The case? You want to know everything, don't you?" He snorted. "Well, I can't tell you..."

"Quiet! Do you hear that?" Bob exclaimed.

Ramírez was silent. There had to be someone on the other side of collapsed opening. Soft scratching noises could be heard.

"They're looking for us, Ramírez, help is coming!" Bob moaned in relief. "Let's hope it's Jupiter and Pete. Then everything will have a happy ending. We wouldn't have lasted much longer in here."

11. Five

“How long have I been asleep,” Jupiter asked excitedly and jumped out of bed.

Pete was already on his feet and cleared the floor hatch. “For a while now! And I must have dozed off as well.”

“We have to go down,” Jupiter decided. “Right away. Both of us. Since Bob is still not back, he could be in great danger.”

Pete came back with a few stacks of paper under his arm. “I’m sure it has to do with that humming. The whole mountain vibrates, and the tunnels aren’t the sturdiest.” He shoved stacks of paper under their blankets.

Jupiter took a few of the computer printouts and started to crumple them up to make little torches. “We don’t have a second flashlight,” he explained in response to Pete’s questioning glance.

Pete nodded and quickly pulled the blankets into place. “Well, that should do it,” he decided. Then he drank one of their cups filled with water in one go. He handed Jupiter another cup.

“If we need to dig, we don’t have any shovels,” said Pete.

“We’ll figure that out if we need to do so.” Jupiter then grabbed the paper torches. One after the other they let themselves down through the hatch. It smelled musty, but above all it was very dark.

“Fire away, Juve,” Pete said.

“Right away.” Jupiter lit one of the torches and they hurried to move forward as fast as possible in the twitching light as the paper torches would not burn for long.

After a few metres, they reached the first junction in the tunnel. Pete stopped and looked around, “I don’t know where to go,” he murmured and drove through his hair. “This place is a real maze.”

Excitedly, Jupiter pointed to a wooden beam by the side. “Look, a green question mark. Bob has marked the way!”

This lifted the spirits of the two detectives. Very quickly, they followed Bob’s chalk marks, but after a while, they realized that the marks didn’t make sense.

“Bob seems to have lost his bearings,” Jupiter said disappointedly. “The signs point in different directions.” He had bent down to examine the markings at a three-way junction.

Pete moaned. “We should never have come in here!”

Jupiter threw away a burnt torch, it was the second to last. “Panicking won’t help us now.”

“Juve, you’re right as usual, but I’d rather you had an idea that might get us out of here. And if we don’t get some light soon, we’ll be in the dark forever.”

Jupiter laughed. “Well, you haven’t lost your sense of humour yet.” He lit the last torch. “By the way, did you notice anything? The noise has faded away.”

“Indeed. It’s all quiet.”

They started calling for Bob, but everything remained silent. So they just kept groping their way forward. Pete went ahead and Jupiter followed close behind. In the meantime both of them had lost all orientation.

Suddenly Pete stopped. "Someone is knocking," he whispered.

Jupiter listened. "True. It comes from there," he said. "Behind you."

"No Jupe, from there—in front of me."

Jupiter took Pete by the arm. "That's what I mean. You can't see your own hand in front of your eyes."

They walked on carefully. The knocking noises became louder. As they crept around a bend, they noticed a bright light in a distance. Pete was about to run when Jupiter stopped him. "Careful," he whispered. "That's not Bob. His flashlight is not that bright."

Slowly they crept forward. The light grew stronger and as they passed a supporting beam and then they saw two men standing a good distance away. In the light of a bright lamp they stood at the end of the tunnel.

"Jupe," Pete whispered. "It's the mad scientist."

"And his eternal companion, the man with limited vocabulary," Jupe added.

"Looks like he's solving another problem, Jupe."

In fact, at that moment, Butch turned around and started to destroy a larger chunk of earth with a chisel that was blocking his way. He had placed his rifle next to him against the wall and a shovel was leaning there as well.

Quietly, the two detectives groped their way closer.

Butch had crushed a rock in the meantime and already turned to the next lump. Gregstone stepped from one foot to the other and watched. He made no attempt to help Butch, although he made an occasional comment. The detectives pricked up their ears...

"Hurry up, Butch," hissed Gregstone. "My mission is almost accomplished. It cannot fail!"

Butch muttered something, but the scientist barely listened to him.

"How lucky I am to have found the case," Gregstone exclaimed. "It was just lying around here, otherwise we'd never have noticed anything. And there was no sign of Ramírez anywhere. Why did he abandon me like that? And who discovered the open steel door?"

"You, of course, Dr Gregstone," Butch replied. "Otherwise we never would have found the case."

"Don't talk, dig!" Gregstone instructed.

"No problem, sir," said Butch.

"Why did Ramírez enter these old tunnels? Butch? You got any idea? And did you bring the case to the Prep Room as I told you to?"

"Of course, Dr Gregstone. Well, yes, not quite, I only got as far as the storeroom. Then you called me."

"All right... continue digging. Ramírez needs to get out of there, and I mean now! Otherwise, everything goes wrong. Who's gonna bring the case up here if not Ramírez?"

"No problem, sir," replied Butch. "I'll be through in a minute. Your schedule is in no danger."

"You've been saying that for hours."

"Minutes, sir, if I may say so."

"Well, get on with it!"

Butch pounded hard on a rock. Then finally he took it apart. With his hands, he pushed the fragments aside.

"I wonder if Bob's in on it," Pete whispered.

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. "He only spoke of Ramírez."

It wasn't long when Butch had uncovered a small opening. The scientist shone a light inside. "Ramírez? Are you in there?" he called out. "Ramírez?"

“He’s here, Gregstone,” a voice replied.

Jupiter and Pete flinched. “That’s Bob!” Pete whispered.

Jupiter pushed Pete into the side and held his finger to his lips in warning.

The next moment, Bob appeared. He crawled out of the hole on his stomach and was coughing. He got up and knocked the dust off his clothes.

Gregstone received him in a rage. “What are you doing in there? How did you even get there! And where is Ramírez?” He took a breath. “Where is he?”

“I already said—” Bob began.

“Shut up!” Gregstone had grabbed the rifle. On his nod, Butch started to tie Bob’s hands.

“If only we could help him,” Jupiter muttered and ventured a little further. “But if we show up now, Gregstone will go completely mad.”

“Here comes Ramírez,” Pete said.

They saw him crawl slowly over the mound. He took longer than Bob as he must have hurt himself. Gregstone helped him up and supported him with his arm.

“What happened?” he asked. “Is this guy behind it?”

Ramírez grabbed his leg. “I hurt my leg, but I don’t think it’s broken.”

“So you can still do my job?” Gregstone asked.

Bob burst in indignantly: “What did I tell you, Ramírez? What is most important to him is that you dance to his tune! He only thinks about his success. He doesn’t care how as long as you do it.”

“Shut up!” Gregstone’s voice was freezing. “Come on, Butch, get this loud-mouth out of here!”

“No problem, sir.” Butch gave Bob a good shove and he stumbled forward. The scientist grabbed Ramírez by the arm and followed them.

12. Four

Jupiter and Pete waited for a moment, then they crept after the small group that led away the tied-up Bob.

After they had walked through the dark tunnel for a while, they suddenly heard a squeaking noise.

"A steel door," hissed Jupiter. "They have arrived at the opening."

"Could use some oil, the old thing," mumbled Pete.

Jupiter and Pete hurried forward. After a while, they too had reached the opening. Light came through the gap in the door as it was not completely closed.

"It's open... lucky us," Jupiter noted. "But should we take the risk of being heard?"

"At least I can fit through," Pete remarked. "But I don't want to go into the lion's den on my own."

"Of course," said the First Investigator. "It's likely they have already moved on. I can feel it, we're very close to the mystery of the humming mountain."

"Bob's probably even closer," Pete remarked.

"So, get out there and tell me if the path is clear."

Pete pushed himself through the opening and got into the passageway. He listened. There was no sound anymore. Gregstone and his men should be long gone with Bob.

"Come, Jupe," cried Pete. "The coast is clear."

Carefully Jupiter pushed open the heavy steel door. A groaning could not be avoided, but soon, he had opened the door so wide that he too could fit through. He stepped up next to Pete and looked around.

"There's an opened door over there," Jupe pointed ahead. "That might be the way they went. Let's go..."

They walked through the door and ended up in a room filled with all kinds of boxes. Between the cardboard boxes piled up on the left and right they could see another door, which was also opened.

"Something's wrong here," he said. "I can literally smell it. What are all these boxes?" Jupiter took a closer look at some of the stickers that indicated the contents of the boxes.

"Funny, these are companies I've never heard of before. But there, that's a computer company. They make chips, and other really expensive computer components." To check, he opened one of the boxes and reached inside. "There you go... computer chips!"

"How is it all connected, Jupe?"

"I don't know yet, Pete. We have to find Bob and ask him. I'm sure he's figured out more by now. Maybe then the pieces of the puzzle will fall into place."

Suddenly Jupiter was silent. He pointed to the front, where between the boxes stood a small brown case. "There it is," he whispered. "The mysterious case which Gregstone spoke of."

"Gee, Jupe! He left it here!"

"We cannot be that lucky!" Jupe remarked.

Jupiter bent down and lifted the case. It was surprisingly light. Carefully he shook it back and forth. "There's something in it. It's got a combination lock, Pete, so your lock picks

won't help."

"Let's try. Maybe we can figure it out," Pete suggested. "Four digits... What's wrong, Jupe?"

The First Investigator had put his finger to his lips as a warning. "I think I heard something," he whispered. "Pete, when you came in, did you look behind the boxes? I just can't shake the feeling that we're not alone in here..."

"I was by your side all the time," Pete replied. "I didn't go behind the boxes, why?"

While he was still talking, Pete saw one of the cardboard columns move slightly. In the next moment, the whole stack fell towards him. He jumped to the side, collided with Jupiter, who also wanted to jump out of the way, and both fell to the ground. The boxes fell on them.

"Now they're trapped, those rats!" It was unmistakably the unpleasant voice of Gregstone. He was laughing and it sounded almost insane. "Come on out so Butch can take care of you! Your excursion is over!"

With difficulty, Pete crawled out from under the load of boxes. Jupiter also pushed a few fallen out components aside and scrambled up. Gregstone stood there and pointed the rifle at the boys while Butch was already waiting with a few ropes to tie them up. The anticipation was written all over his face.

With a heavy heart, Jupiter had to admit to himself that they had fallen into a trap. "Okay, don't bother," he said and held out his hands in resignation. "Where's Bob?"

Butch was silent, instead Gregstone replied: "Ramírez is watching him. You'll see your friend in a minute. And now, get the case, Butch."

"No problem, sir," Butch replied. The case had slipped under a few boxes in the confusion. Butch retrieved the case and handed it to Gregstone, who gave a false smile on his lips. "Thank you very much..." And to the boys, he added: "Well, good bait catches fine fish."

Butch pushed Jupiter and Pete out into the corridor. After a while, they reached another room. Bob was sitting on the floor, tied by feet and hands, guarded by Ramírez who leaned against a table. Jupiter quickly scanned the room with his eyes. He discovered a conspicuous suit hanging over the back of the chair. It was a space suit. As he let his gaze wander through a massive glass window, he spotted the space shuttle waiting for its deployment. 'Masterplane' was painted in small letters above the tail.

"Whew," Jupiter said.

"But that's—" Pete murmured.

"That's a spacecraft!" Jupe interrupted.

Gregstone grinned and put the case on the table. "Yes, here you can see my jewel, my development, my child, now you can finally marvel at it. I suspect that you were keen on it all the time! But now it is no use to you anymore. Go on, over there!" he ordered sharply. "There is no time to lose. We're still on schedule!"

Butch pushed Jupiter and Pete closer to Bob and told them to sit on the floor with him. The two boys sat down and Butch tied their feet.

"Are they supposed to stay here in the Prep Room?" Ramírez asked, who had followed the developments in silence until now.

"Yes." Gregstone looked at his wristwatch. "It'll take too long to get them back into Room V. Besides, I want to have better control over them. Ramírez, you guard them and change clothes while you do it. You'll leave as planned. Get going!" he ordered.

Ramírez nodded. "My leg still hurts, but it should be okay."

Gregstone seemed pleased. "Butch, prepare Masterplane for launch. I'll go to the Control Room and get on the flight computer for the final preparations."

Ramírez nodded obediently. “Should I take the case?”

“No need,” Gregstone said. “Butch will bring it aboard beforehand.”

Butch had also understood his work instructions. He stepped next to Jupiter, grabbed the case and disappeared. Gregstone took the rifle and headed towards the Control Room. At the door, he turned around. “Ramírez, if the rats give trouble here, you call me. Then I’ll make short work of them!”

When Gregstone finally left, Ramírez silently began to gather his things. Now and then he glanced over to The Three Investigators who were talking quietly in whispers. Ramírez did not say anything.

“How did they get you?” Bob asked. “I was hoping you could get me out.”

Jupiter nodded apologetically. “Gregstone must have heard us and then set a trap for us. He is a dangerous adversary.”

“Butch has all the stupidity he needs,” Pete said so loudly that Ramírez suddenly turned to look at them. Pete gave him a friendly smile. “Bob, you’d better tell us what you found out,” he muttered.

They put their heads closer together. “It’s about this space shuttle,” Bob began. “Gregstone is planning something mysterious with it. I saw him on the computer earlier. He seems pretty crazy to me.” Bob continued to give a brief account of what he had experienced.

“Probably a secret transporter, this shuttle,” Jupiter thought. “It must be made of a special material that cannot be detected by radar. Gregstone took over this facility after NASA abandoned it. Then he converted everything for his own purposes.”

“Right,” Pete agreed. “He probably didn’t have to do that much.”

“What’s the matter, Bob?” asked Jupiter, who noticed that his friend suddenly slipped restlessly to and fro.

Bob gave him a signal to be quiet. “I think I’m getting my shackles undone,” he whispered. “Butch tied me up in a hurry...”

“I’m afraid he spent far too much time on mine,” Jupiter pulled a wry face. “The rope is cutting my wrists.”

Jupe took a look over at Ramírez. In the meantime, he had put on matching shoes to his space suit and also packed all kinds of other things in a solid box. Now he pulled out a big mirrored helmet and put it on the table.

Suddenly Gregstone’s voice came out of the loudspeaker. “Fifty-five minutes to launch. Switching to the computer countdown.” It clicked.

The detectives now heard a computer voice: “Fifty-four minutes—beep!”

Ramírez looked over at the detectives and checked his watch. Although the start was imminent, he was calm. Then he looked through the glass window and a smile flashed across his face. Jupiter followed his gaze and he saw Butch going across the narrow bridge leading to the space shuttle. In his hand, he held the small brown case.

“Look!” Jupiter elbowed Pete in the side. “Butch just went in to space shuttle.” From his position, he was able to see everything. “Now he comes back out, leaving the case inside.”

They saw Butch walking back over the bridge into the launch hall.

“Do you have any idea what’s in that case, Bob?” Pete asked. “They’re taking good care of it.”

Bob shook his head. “Ramírez didn’t tell me.”

“Fifty minutes—beep!” said the computer.

Then they heard Gregstone, who asked Ramírez over the loudspeakers if everything was clear. The Mexican pressed a button on the intercom and gave his okay.

“Are the detectives good? Check again whether the shackles are tight enough,” demanded the scientist.

Ramírez left the intercom and went over to the detectives following Gregstone’s instruction. He visibly dragged his injured leg.

Bob winced and quickly thought about how he could best hide his loosened shackles. Jupiter already cleared his throat to distract Ramírez. But Ramírez was satisfied with a superficial look at the detectives’ wrists and ankles.

“Forty-six minutes—beep!” the computer sounded.

Ramírez went back to the intercom. “All right, they’re not getting off that easy.” Then he grabbed his space suit.

“I saved Ramírez’s life... down below, in the collapsed tunnel,” whispered Bob as the Mexican laboriously took off his jeans and tried to force his injured leg into the space suit. “If we weren’t on the trail of his revered Gregstone, I’m sure he’d find us quite nice.”

Jupiter nodded as that could explain Ramírez’s behaviour. After the mishap in the gold mine tunnel, he probably didn’t dare to act like a criminal in front of Bob. Maybe he even had a bad conscience.

Jupiter looked at Ramírez thoughtfully as the Mexican tugged the space suit at his legs. “Maybe you should talk to Ramírez again,” he hissed in Bob’s direction.

“He won’t change sides,” muttered Bob. “I’ve been trying.” But with a quick nod, he signalled that he had now freed his hands from the shackles.

“Forty-two minutes—beep!”

Suddenly, Ramírez took off his space suit and shoes.

“Just don’t move from this spot!” he gasped, looking over at The Three Investigators. “I’ll be right back!” He put the suit over the chair and disappeared through a side door.

13. Three

“Where did Ramírez go?” Pete asked astonished.

Bob shook the rope off his wrist. “The toilet,” he said. “It’s behind the door over there. He probably wants to empty his bladder before he flies.” Bob pulled his feet closer and started tampering with the shackles at his ankle. “It’s better that way, otherwise during launch, it can get very uncomfortable.”

“You know your way around this?” grinned Jupiter. “I thought that realistic details like this would not be covered in computer games.”

“I have studied flying in general, Jupe—reports from astronauts and on the NASA website...”

“Oh, yeah?” Jupiter impatiently tugged at his shackles.

At that moment, Bob finally had his feet free. He jumped to Jupiter who had already turned his back expectantly. Bob tampered with the rope.

“Darn!” he murmured and tried to get a finger into the tightened tangle, “Butch has really got a grip! I can’t undo this knot!”

Jupiter turned his eyes and drew in the air sharply.

“Ow!” he shouted. “Be careful! The rope’s cutting my wrists!”

“Forty minutes—beep!” sounded the computer voice.

Pete was sliding more and more restlessly back and forth during this time. “Try my hands,” he suggested. He could hardly stand to see Bob getting nowhere with Jupiter’s shackles. “Maybe it would be easier here. Then I can help get Jupe free.”

Helplessly, Bob turned to Pete. Time was running out and his newly regained self-confidence was suddenly gone. “What am I gonna do?” he said in a shaky voice. “I cannot get it loose either, Pete... What strength this Butch has!” Nervously, he continued to fiddle with the knot, with sweat dripping down his forehead.

“Bob, hurry!” urged Jupiter. He looked at the toilet door. “Ramírez won’t be forever in the toilet. Even if he squeezes every last drop out of himself!”

Bob was close to losing his temper. He got up and stood between Jupiter and Pete. “I’m sorry, I just can’t get Butch’s knot undone,” he said. “Now what? Do you see a knife anywhere?”

Then Jupiter had an idea. “Bob! Leave that shackle for a moment. Go slide a chair under the handle of the toilet door. Then Ramírez can’t get out and we can gain time. Then go look for a pair of scissors or a knife!”

Relieved, Bob ran across the room, grabbed a chair and carefully pushed it under the toilet door handle. It fitted nicely. He breathed out. Now he had some air.

At that moment, the loudspeaker crackled: “Ramírez!” That was unmistakably Gregstone’s voice. “Let’s go! Get in the space shuttle immediately! When Butch finishes his preparations for the launch, he’ll take care of our three rats!”

Shocked, the three boys looked at each other.

“If Ramírez doesn’t show up, Gregstone come in here within seconds!” Bob realized.

“Thirty-eight minutes, beep!”

Jupiter was silent. If he had had a free hand, it would have moved immediately to his lower lip. The First Investigator thought hard.

"Gee, Bob, there's a chance!" Jupiter suddenly said. "You go instead!"

Bob looked at him stunned. "What?"

"Put on the space suit, Bob. With the mirrored helmet, Gregstone won't recognize you."

"And he'll mistake you for Ramírez," Pete added. "You are about the same height. It's very simple. You go into Masterplane and take out that brown case. With that, we'll know what this whole mission is about... and perhaps we can even stop Gregstone."

Excitedly, Jupiter slipped back and forth. "Go on, do it," he said. "There's enough time for you to get the case and come back down! Anyway, you can't free us now."

"Bob, there's over thirty minutes to launch... There's enough time!" Pete urged.

Mechanically Bob stepped to the table and began to put on the space suit and shoes.

"Ramírez is stuck," Jupiter said and looked over to the toilet door where nothing moved. The Mexican seemed to be taking his time and had not noticed any of all this.

"Thirty-six minutes, beep!"

In the meantime, Bob had almost completely put on the suit. "And then?" He found his voice. "And then, when I get the case, what happens next? By then, Butch will have turned you two into hamburgers."

"If he can get here so quickly," replied Jupiter. "You won't need more than three or four minutes. And maybe the balance of power will change once we have the case." The First Investigator was thrilled with the idea.

"And after I get the case, I'm supposed to just walk out of space shuttle?"

"You just say you have to go to the toilet," Pete suggested.

"Perhaps you can open the case and see what's inside first," added Jupiter. "Something will come to your mind. It has a combination lock. Try the number 2-0-5-4."

"What makes you think that's the numbers?" Bob asked in surprise.

"I'll explain later," said Jupiter.

Meanwhile, Bob was standing there fully dressed in the space suit. The helmet was in his hand.

"Thirty-four minutes—beep!" came the time check.

Suddenly Ramírez rumbled against the door from inside the toilet. Now he discovered that he had been locked in. "Hey," he shouted. "What's the idea of this? Let me out!"

Gingerly Bob stepped from one foot to the other. "Shouldn't we reconsider everything, Juve?"

"The clock is ticking. Gregstone will get suspicious if Ramírez doesn't get into the space shuttle soon!" Pete burst out. "If something goes wrong, you can still catch Gregstone by surprise and grab his rifle."

Again the loudspeaker crackled: "Ramírez, where are you?" Gregstone barked into the intercom. "You want me to drag you into the space shuttle?"

Bob went over to the intercom. Walking was difficult for him, not only because the space suit was uncomfortable and unfamiliar. "I'm coming," Bob said soundlessly into the device. Then he put on the helmet.

"Don't forget the box that Ramírez packed," Jupiter reminded Bob. "Or else our scam will be blown."

Bob nodded and grabbed the box. With heavy steps, he staggered towards the corridor. In his space suit, Bob felt strangely isolated from the world, like in a ski suit lined with cotton wool. The unfamiliar helmet did the rest, as it restricted the view. Bob bent over to get a

better view of the ground—small pictograms with an arrow pointing up showed the way to the Control Room.

He went into a short windowless corridor that led to a door. Above it was written in big letters: 'Control Room'. So this was the nerve centre of the whole operation. His breath became heavy. Now it came down to it. Bob pushed the button, and the door slid to the side.

Carefully he entered the Control Room. With a whirring sound, the door closed behind him. He immediately noticed a glass window through which was the Masterplane. It was illuminated by spotlights and was waiting to be launched into space.

But where was Gregstone? Bob walked on. Hardly a sound penetrated his helmet, which muffled everything. He noticed a hissing sound that must have come from some machine, interspersed with a few electronic signals. Bob turned his head in the direction the sounds seemed to come from, and carefully walked on. He hoped that the scientist didn't discover him too soon. And hopefully he would not have to talk too much. At least the helmet's viewing glass was mirrored from the outside.

Then he saw Gregstone. He had turned his back on him and was crouching in front of several monitors on which showed the launch hall, the space shuttle and the cockpit. The scientist was typing furiously on a keyboard and seemed not to have noticed Bob's arrival. He was probably checking the launch procedures one last time.

Then Bob saw the door to the launch hall, but he had to go past Gregstone to get there. "Thirty minutes—beep!"

Carefully Bob went on, as if in slow motion, he staggered towards Gregstone. When he was about to reach him, he decided to say something to the scientist. It was probably less noticeable that way. Just in time, he remembered that Ramírez called Gregstone by his first name.

"Greg, it's me! I'm going into the shuttle now." Hopefully, the muffling of the helmet would prevent Gregstone from recognizing his voice.

In an instant, Gregstone turned around. He looked at him and his expression relaxed. "There you are at last, Ramírez! Come on, hurry up. Butch has found a few little problems, but he should be done with everything in a minute." He laughed. "You know how he feels about problems..."

"Yes, Greg," Bob forced himself to laugh briefly and then walked on. "Whew," he exhaled. Everything seemed to be working so far, he thought.

"And remember to strap the case down," cried Gregstone. "I see that your leg's obviously better already!"

Bob startled. He hadn't paid any attention to Ramírez being hurt. "I chilled it," Bob lied. "That helped."

"Have a good flight." Gregstone seemed pleased with Bob's response. Anyway, he turned his attention back to the monitors.

Bob went on. About five more metres to the door. What would he do if the door was locked? Or secured? What if he had to know some kind of secret code, which, of course, he didn't know? As good as Jupiter's idea had been, it was full of pitfalls. Bob suppressed his doubts and staggered on quickly. When he had reached the heavy door to the launch hall, he suddenly heard Gregstone's sharp voice.

"Stop! Wait! Stop!"

Bob flinched and turned around slowly. Now it was all over. He saw Gregstone coming towards him with hurried steps. "Wait a minute!" His face was rigid. The scientist must have noticed something.

Bob pulled himself together. "Yes, Greg?"

Now the scientist was standing right in front of him, waving something in front of his helmet. "Here, your code card! Ramírez, you're a little unfocused. How are you going to get through the door without it?"

"Oh, yeah, thanks, Greg." Bob exhaled, took the card, and turned quickly. "It's those detectives," he mumbled as he walked on, "I forgot all about the card."

"What did you say? The detectives? What are those rats doing anyway? Still all tied up?"

"Yeah, sure. They won't be able to break free anytime soon."

"That's it. We got them covered. When it's all over, we'll put them back in the tunnels!" Gregstone laughed briefly, then turned around and walked briskly back to his computer.

Bob felt numbness in his legs. Staggering, he took the last steps to the door, saw the slot through which he had to insert in the code card and did it. The door slid to the side, he stepped through it, the door hissed back and there he was, in the launch hall on the bridge to the space shuttle... alone.

14. Two

“Bob is through!” Jupiter cheered. He looked triumphantly at Pete. Through the window, they had been able to watch how Bob had crossed the bridge to Masterplane and went inside it. Everything seemed to go according to plan.

Jupiter turned his attention to the toilet door. The blows that Ramírez administered from inside the door became harder. “Are you still there?” he shouted. “Let me out of here now! What did you do? You’re endangering everything!”

The First Investigator checked his shackles, which he was constantly tugging at, but they did not get any looser. Then he turned his attention back to the space shuttle, from which he expected Bob to emerge immediately with the brown case in his hand.

Suddenly his gaze went rigid and he held his breath. As if by magic, the hatch closed before Bob came out. The movement of the hatch took only a few seconds and Bob was locked inside Masterplane.

“Oh, no!” Jupiter slumped. “Dr Gregstone thinks that Ramírez is in the spacecraft,” he said to Pete, who also realized the same thing. “If he doesn’t know something is wrong, he’ll launch Masterplane.”

“But this must not happen under any circumstances,” cried Pete. “Bob is not an astronaut! How is he supposed to operate that thing? It would be certain death for Bob.”

“He’s got to let Gregstone know that we fooled him and that he’s not Ramírez. He’s got to admit it!” Jupiter exclaimed.

Pete nodded. “I hope he does!” He turned his attention to the toilet door.

Nervously, Jupiter followed Pete’s gaze. “Alternatively, Ramírez is the one that can save Bob!”

At that moment, the chair slipped away from under the door handle and a few seconds later Ramírez was standing in the room. It did not take him long to grasp the situation. “Where’s Bob?” he shouted. “My gosh, what have you all done?”

“Bob is in Masterplane,” replied Jupiter. “He put on your space suit and just walked in.”

Ramírez needed a moment to absorb this news. Then he rushed to the intercom and pressed the button to contact Gregstone.

“Greg, Greg! This is Ramírez!”

“Yeah?” Gregstone’s voice didn’t sound surprised at all.

“Greg, the boys set me up!” He spoke in haste. “I was locked in the toilet! And now Bob’s in the space shuttle!”

Gregstone coughed. “I know, Ramírez. I think our friend over there in Masterplane is already working up quite a sweat.” The scientist’s voice sounded remarkably calm.

“But Greg! Uh, what do you mean? How did you know?”

“I saw everything from the CCTV.”

“What am I going to do now?” Ramírez asked.

“Cut the other two’s feet free. Leave their hands tied up and bring them to me!” The instruction came in short and sharp. “I won’t let them out of my sight again!”

“What about Bob?”

“Just follow what I tell you, Ramírez.”

As if stunned, the Mexican stepped to the cupboard and took out a knife. Then he went to Jupiter and Pete and freed them from their shackles. With difficulty, the two detectives stood up. The computer voice announced that there was only twenty-four minutes to go.

Ramírez pressed the button to the Control Room and pushed Jupiter and Pete inside. Then he followed them and the door closed behind the three of them.

Gregstone turned around on his swivel chair. "Welcome, my friends!" he grinned. "I've warned you. This is where I play my game, not yours." He pointed to a black leather sofa, which was placed behind him on the side of the wall. "Have a seat, dear guests. From here you can watch your friend's flight."

Jupiter and Pete were left breathless. Should this mean that Gregstone wanted to launch Masterplane with Bob?

"This is madness, Dr Gregstone!" exclaimed Jupiter in indignation. "Are you bluffing, or do you really want to launch Bob into space? That can't be your intention!" Desperately he looked at Pete, who had lost his tongue in fright.

Ramírez was also surprised. "But, Greg, you, uh, you're just fooling with them, right? We have to abort the launch now!" He hesitated. "Or, I... I can still get on the shuttle. There is enough time!"

"Sit down with those two rats there," Gregstone said to Ramírez. "You've messed up enough!"

The Mexican did as he was told and was so frightened that he didn't say anything.

"Well, guess what? Your fellow detective out there doesn't know anything about this yet," Gregstone giggled to himself, then pressed a black button and bent over to the microphone.

"Hello Ramírez, can you hear me?"

Bob's voice came out of the loudspeaker unsteadily. "Yeah, this is, uh, Ramírez. Greg... Why did you lock the hatch?"

Gregstone turned towards the leather sofa with a grin, then he pressed the black talk button again. "Well, Ramírez, you're not going to fly with the hatch open, are you?"

"Bob, he knows everything!" Jupiter shouted in between at full volume.

Immediately Gregstone released the talk button and jumped up. Something fell to the ground with a crack and slid away. It was that remote control he was always fiddling with.

"Don't do that again!" Gregstone shouted, and threw another threatening glance at Jupiter. "I, I, I am in command here! Only me! Next time I'm gonna shut you up!"

Jupiter lifted his head and calmly said: "All right, Dr Gregstone."

When the scientist turned back to his monitor, Jupiter looked down. The remote control had slid towards Pete and stopped not far away from his feet. The thing had been cracked open due to the impact on the floor, and an exposed edge seemed sharp enough to cut their restraints.

Something stirred in Bob. Why had the scientist suddenly cut off the conversation? And was that someone yelling out something in the background? Was it Juve? Bob wasn't sure. On the monitor, he had seen Gregstone got up very quickly. But unfortunately, the camera didn't have the whole room in view.

Back at Gregstone's desk, a picture on the monitor flickered up, and Jupiter, Pete and Ramírez could make out Bob, who had sat down in the pilot's seat.

Gregstone pushed the talk button. "I see that you are seated very well there," he said with satisfaction. "That's wonderful."

Since the hatch of the space shuttle was closed, Bob didn't know what to do anymore. Something didn't seem right. Why did the hatch close so quickly? If everything went on like

this, he would inevitably be catapulted into space.

He thought back and forth about admitting he wasn't Ramírez... and time was running out. The digital clock in the cockpit showed twenty minutes to go.

In front of him were keyboards, sliders and numerous buttons, all of which meant nothing to him. He remembered how he had asked Ramírez to show him the shuttle. Now he sat here on the pilot's seat, of course under completely different circumstances.

"Greg..." Bob began.

"Yeah?"

"Greg, I'm, uh... Can't we postpone the launch? I feel... sick."

"I can imagine it," Gregstone replied. "But never mind. It's normal."

"Greg?"

"Yeah?"

"I, well, I have to go to the toilet again!"

"Too late, Ramírez. Save it when you get back. It won't be long, I hope."

"Greg? Uh, Dr Gregstone?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm not Ramírez, you know, I'm Bob. I snuck in here in place of Ramírez." Now it was finally out. Gregstone would take bitter revenge on him, but at least he would get him out of this space shuttle. Bob was relieved.

"I know," Gregstone said.

"You know what?"

"I know you're Bob. I have your two friends here now. Would you like to see them?"

A picture on the monitor flashed up and Bob saw Jupiter and Pete sitting on the leather sofa with their hands behind their backs. He remained silent in dismay.

"And would you like me to show you what the Prep Room looks like? It was really exciting watching you guys." He giggled.

The picture changed and Bob saw the Prep Room where the three of them were earlier tied up on the floor. At the toilet door, the chair with which he had used to lock Ramírez had fallen down.

It all became clear to Bob—Gregstone had seen the whole scam from the beginning—how Bob had freed himself, how they had outsmarted Ramírez and how Bob had put on the space suit. But most of all, Gregstone had let him proceed.

What was going on?

15. One

“Dr Gregstone, I want to get out of here!”

“Oh, no, Bob. We’ll play my game. I’ll make you a deal—a deal with Gregstone. If you don’t accept it, it’ll be deadly for you.”

“I don’t quite understand...”

“There are eighteen minutes to go. In that time, I can give you valuable tips for your space flight—because it’s you who’ll be flying, not Ramírez. If you don’t honour my deal, you won’t survive the launch.”

“But I can’t possibly operate this space shuttle...”

“You don’t need to. I’ll manage everything from here—by computer. I’m practically in the pilot’s seat. All you have to do is follow my instructions. First of all, fix my little satellite up there, because I can’t do it from here. There are just a few things you have to do there, and you’ll manage. You’re a smart detective.” He giggled. “And then you’ll come back to Base One safe and sound.”

“To Base One?”

“To Mother Earth...” Gregstone smiled and released the talk button so Bob couldn’t hear him anymore. “Maybe...” he added, and the smile spread all over his face.

“Maybe what?” Ramírez had finally found his voice. He had been listening intensely to the conversation with his mouth open. But Gregstone ignored Ramírez and looked in another direction.

Butch had meanwhile entered the Control Room, picked up a cloth to wipe his hands, which had become oily from his work.

“There weren’t any problems, were there?” Butch asked, glancing critically at the two detectives.

“On the contrary,” Gregstone replied. “Everything is absolutely fine.”

Butch grinned and put the cloth aside.

But Ramírez could not be fobbed off that easily. “What did you mean by ‘fine’, Greg? How is Bob going to come down in one piece?” To give more weight to his question, Ramírez now stood up.

This seemed to upset Gregstone. He turned to him. “You know my satellite needs repair,” he began. “What I haven’t explained to you exactly... uh, is that the laser needs to be replaced... specifically the computer chip that controls it. If the laser goes haywire, sooner or later it will destroy the satellite and with it, my brilliant dream.”

“The laser is damaged?” Ramírez asked.

“Yeah. It’s shooting around wildly.”

Ramírez turned pale. “Then it could hit Masterplane and shoot it down!” he exclaimed in shock.

“Of course.”

“And in the first place, you planned to send me up there?”

“Would have, would have... But everything is different now...” Gregstone turned up his nose. “Thanks to my wisdom... Thanks to my intelligence, Bob the smart detective is flying instead. You’re safe here. Nothing can happen to you.”

But Gregstone's words did not have the hoped-for effect.

"You would have risked my life for your idea?" Ramírez yelled at him. "And now you're risking Bob's life? Even if he survives the launch of Masterplane, the laser up there might finish him off!"

In the meantime, Gregstone had got up from his chair. Butch, who felt that the situation was about to get out of control, tensed his muscles and went into attack position.

"Whose side are you on, Ramírez?" hissed the scientist. "You're not half as smart as me!"

"Bob saved my life," cried Ramírez. "Masterplane must not launch!" He jumped off, and with fists outstretched, he rushed at Gregstone. But his injured leg held him back.

Butch was faster. Just two steps and he was with Ramírez. His muscular arms wrapped around the Mexican, who was physically far inferior. Butch almost choked him before twisting the young man's arm behind his back so he could hardly move.

Butch looked questioningly at Gregstone for further instructions. The situation had confused him as to who was friend or foe and he didn't know what to do.

"Tie him up," Gregstone said succinctly.

Butch's forehead was furrowing. "Ramírez?"

"Yes! Tie him up. Tie him up! Or is that too difficult for you to understand?"

"No, Dr Gregstone." Butch shook his head and the familiar grin appeared again on his face. "No problem, sir." With practised grips, Butch tied Ramírez's hands behind his back and pushed him back onto the sofa where he came to sit with a plop beside Jupiter.

The First Investigator had followed the developments with great interest. He winked at Ramírez appreciatively, because it had not only been a courageous act by the young man, but also a great step for him to break away from the scientist. Gregstone had possessed much power over the Mexican. Now Ramírez had recognized the danger and finally freed himself from his mentor's control. He was now on their side, at least for the time being. The only problem was that their new ally was also tied up and sitting beside them.

At the same time, Jupiter was disappointed that their situation had finally worsened. With a cooler head, there would have been more to be gained. Pete was also depressed. From what he could follow on the monitor, Bob's reaction showed that he had realized the situation. The clock, which showed the countdown to the start, was at twelve minutes. There wasn't much time left.

Gregstone had meanwhile returned to his control desk and pointed to a big red button that flashed every second. "You wish you could have got to this, huh, Ramírez? The button that stops the launch." He grinned over to Jupiter and Pete. "Take a good look at this magic button, you super detectives. Sorry as I am, but none of you will get to push it."

Amused, he teasingly moved his hand closely over the button, but did not press it, instead he reached for the talk button and pressed it. While Gregstone gave Bob some instructions, Jupiter cast a scrutinizing eye on Butch, who listened intently to the conversation between Gregstone and Bob. Then he turned his attention to the broken remote control which was close to Pete's feet. Jupiter pondered for a moment. Then he winked at Pete and nodded in the direction of the plastic thing.

Pete understood immediately and he nodded back in reply.

"I'll distract him first," Jupe whispered to Pete, who again nodded back.

"You forgot one thing, Dr Gregstone," Jupe called out.

"You always have something to say, don't you?" Gregstone turned around.

Jupiter tried to put on his most innocent face. "Maybe you should explain to Bob how to open the brown case. I suppose he needs the contents to repair the satellite," Jupiter

suggested.

“You’re right, Detective, but I can give him the numbers later,” Gregstone said.

“You don’t know Bob. He’s clumsy with combination locks, so it’s better that he gets it open now.” That wasn’t true, of course, but Jupiter hoped that this untruth would allow Bob to open the case earlier and figure out what to do with the contents.

Gregstone was out of rhythm for a short moment. “So, Bob, are you listening to me? Your fat friend says that you have trouble with combination locks. So I’m gonna give you the numbers now. I hope for your sake that you’ll have the case opened in no time.” He hesitated briefly. “2-0-5-4,” he said slowly.

“Okay,” Bob replied. On the monitor they could see him grabbing the case.

Gregstone and Butch stared at the monitor in awe, focussing on Bob’s actions.

“Now!” Jupiter whispered to Pete.

Pete stretched and pinched the remote control with his feet. Then he bent his knees, lifted his legs and turned to Jupiter who had moved to the side in time.

The remote control dropped into the gap between the backrest and Jupiter’s back. Immediately Pete had his legs down again, but Gregstone had noticed the movement. “What’s going on?”

“My legs hurt,” Pete complained. “I need to stretch them.”

Gregstone laughed bitterly. “What would your friend in the space shuttle say? He must be in a much more uncomfortable position! So stop whining.” So he calmly turned around and went back to Bob, who was pretending to fumble with the lock.

“What was that number again?” Bob asked.

“2-0-5-4. How hard can it be? Come on! There’s not much time left, and you’re gonna have to buckle up.”

“2-0-5-4,” Bob muttered. “Damn! The lock’s stuck.”

“This can’t be happening!” yelled Gregstone. “Are you an idiot or just pretending?”

“All right.” Bob turned the dial and the suitcase popped open. “I got it!”

Through the monitor, Jupiter and Pete could see that the spare part was neatly tied up inside the case. It was a little metal plate that had a computer chip stuck on it.

“There you go,” cried Gregstone in relief. “Listen up, Bob! I need you to focus on the tasks, otherwise the last minutes of your life will be numbered.” He turned to look at the clock. “I can even tell you very precisely—you can breathe for a whole nine minutes.”

“All right, sir.”

“There you go. Now it’s time to concentrate!” Gregstone prepared Bob for the launch. The first thing he had to do was to key in some commands and press some switches. Butch followed the developments with interest, so that had gone well.

With the broken remote control, Jupiter started to rub with the sharp plastic edge on the rope around his wrists.

“Can you make it?” murmured Pete.

Jupiter nodded. “I hope so. There’s still eight minutes left, but this thing is not a knife...”

“When you are free, all you have to do is press the big red button,” Ramirez whispered. “Then the launch is immediately cancelled and everything has to be reprogrammed. That takes at least a day or two.”

Gregstone heard the murmurs among his captives. “Shut up!” he yelled.

16. Zero

Bob had not been able to follow the developments in the Control Room from the monitor, but he was able to regain hope. He knew that Jupiter was planning something. Why else would the First Investigator have started this diversionary tactic? Bob felt like it was clutching at straws while he talked to Gregstone about the launch.

“Well, I’ve connected the last cable, Dr Gregstone,” Bob finally said.

“Good boy. Now, you have to sit properly and fasten the seat belts...” The scientist watched Bob on his monitor. “Yeah, back down, knees bent. Did you put the case back on its rack?”

“Yes, sir. How does this thing fly anyway?”

“Masterplane? This is a genuine Gregstone invention—the magnetic drive ejects you out and then the new rocket engines push you up fast. You’ll be a little squished, but luckily you’re not as fat as your smart friend here.” Gregstone turned around and Jupiter had to interrupt the activity behind his back. “With his weight, Masterplane would not even take off.” He laughed gloatingly.

Bob immediately tried to get Gregstone’s attention again. “The sitting posture is very uncomfortable,” he explained. “All the time I feel that I have to go to the toilet.”

Gregstone laughed. “It’s not just a feeling. Some astronauts even put on diapers—custom-made ones. I hope you went to the toilet earlier... Now, make sure your seat belts are fastened properly, or they won’t hold you. You have to withstand more than 3G’s up there.”

“Thank you for your concern, Dr Gregstone. But what is 3G?”

“This is the force with which you are pressed onto the seat,” Bob heard a voice familiar to him. As usual, Jupiter just couldn’t hold back answering such questions. “You’ll hardly be able to breathe. 3G—that’s three times the weight you have on Earth, Bob.” Data, numbers, physics—Jupe knew all about that.

“Hey, by the way, Bob, do you remember the time we flew over the Swiss Alps?” Jupe continued. “This would be just like that... remember what we did?” For this comment from the background, Jupiter got a nasty glance from Gregstone.

“Should I put a gag on him?” Butch asked eagerly.

Gregstone waved him down. “Next time, just slap him in the face so that he doesn’t cause any more trouble...”

“With pleasure,” grinned Butch. To warm up, he rubbed his hands.

“How long will I be up there?” Bob intervened. He had to get Gregstone back on course and above all, he had to think about why Jupiter had mentioned one of their past cases that involved them boarding a plane to go over the Swiss Alps. What has that flight got to do with this? Was Jupe trying to hint something to him indirectly?

“I mean, how long does it take to go to zero gravity?” Bob continued.

“Less than ten minutes. Then you’ll be in orbit. And then it takes you a while to get to my satellite. And, uh...”

“Yes, Dr Gregstone?”

“You’ll survive the launch. Breathing will be difficult, of course, but only for a few minutes. Think of Gregstone the genius and his big goal.”

"If I only knew that earlier..." Bob remarked. "Will I get dizzy?"

"Possibly." Gregstone made a dismissive gesture. "But you'll recover quickly. After all, I haven't a moment to lose."

"Dr Gregstone," Bob said, "if you continue to talk to me in that tone, you cannot expect my cooperation."

"Watch it, pal! Your life is on the line!"

"I'm not your pal!" As he was saying that, something struck him. Something came to him what Jupiter had alluded to—the flight over the Swiss Alps ended with a disastrous crash landing. When Juve said 'this would be just like that...', would he have meant that this flight was leading to a disaster?

Bob was getting uncomfortable. All of a sudden, he felt cramped in those pressing straps and in that tight cockpit. The closer the launch approached, the more uncertain he became whether someone could really save him.

Juve had also said: 'Remember what we did'. In that Swiss Alps incident, the three of them had worked to get out of the catastrophe. Perhaps Jupiter and Pete had a plan to get out of this catastrophe as well. But there were only six minutes left until the launch. Soon one could already count the seconds.

"Can you still abort the launch, Dr Gregstone?" he suddenly asked.

"I can do anything, Bob. All I have to do is press this red button here." Gregstone laughed. "But don't worry, I won't press it."

"That's not my concern at all, quite the opposite." Bob now suspected what Jupiter was up to. He was apparently in the process of releasing his restraints. With a jump, he could reach the red button and stop the launch. It was a race against time. All Bob could do was to distract Gregstone from his two friends sitting on the sofa.

"Dr Gregstone," Bob began again.

"Yeah?"

"I have a request, sir. I am about to fly off and I would like to see my friends in these last minutes before the launch. Could you adjust the camera angle so that I can see them?" Bob pleaded.

Gregstone pondered for a moment. "I guess I could grant you this request," he said. He pushed a few buttons and the sofa with Jupiter, Pete and Ramirez panned into the cockpit monitor.

"It's perfect," Bob said. "Thank you, Dr Gregstone."

"Not at all. You can see that I'm a friendly person."

"Can I have anything to eat here in the space shuttle?" Bob began another innocuous topic. In fact, he could hardly concentrate on Gregstone's reply as he was paying too much attention to the monitor. He noticed Jupiter was using his head to signal to him and his shoulders were moving. Yes, he was working on his restraints.

"Are you even listening to me, Bob? I said there's plenty to eat. Everything is in bags, and there's enough for over a week. You see, Gregstone even thinks of emergencies."

"Yes, I understand... Dr Gregstone, this whole thing is some sort of secret flight, isn't it?" Bob hastily thought of another possibility. "Can't the military see us on their radar screens?"

Gregstone laughed. "They can't detect a Gregstone invention! The GG Company, under my supervision, developed a stealth alloy for military aircraft. It has a special coating that makes the aircraft invisible to radar. Masterplane even has an improved version—like my little satellite, by the way. And thanks to the magnetic launch, the rocket's fire is only visible after a certain height."

Bob was silent. Satellite, spaceship, computer, laser weapon—those were also keywords of the *Master of the Universe* computer game that he played. And then the numbers of the combination lock, suddenly he knew why it looked familiar. ‘2-0-5-4’—if one thought of the four digits as a number, then that was exactly the year when the rule of the universe began in the game! This could not just be a coincidence.

Bob looked at the monitor. Jupiter was still struggling. The clock countdown was at four minutes. It seemed to him as if time was no longer running evenly, but faster and faster. His back began to tingle. He knew he had to still divert Gregstone’s attention.

“What about all these buttons and dials?” Bob continued with his distraction tactics. “I thought you said the computer controls everything.” Another hope grew in him. Maybe there was also a way to stop the launch from inside the cockpit.

“Don’t worry. They’re switched off, but they do work in case of emergencies. You can have manual control during the approach to the satellite, as you already know from your computer game.”

“How did you know about my computer game?” Bob remarked.

“I know more than you think, Bob.”

“Dr Gregstone,” he said slowly. “You mean *Master of the Universe*?”

“Yes, and you know it as well.”

“How do you know that?”

“I found the web site address in your wallet. I’ve checked everything, so I know that you’re in the game.” His voice became sharp. “And that’s why you’re here. You’re here to foil my plans.”

“So that was it,” Bob shook his head. “Dr Gregstone, your intelligence... or your paranoia has played a trick on you. We’re not here for *Master of the Universe*. It’s just a coincidence that I’m in the game.”

“You expect me to believe that? You must have been hired by the Secret Service. Since they couldn’t get anywhere themselves, those bunglers tried to get to me with you three unsuspecting guys.” Gregstone laughed. “The Secret Service has long been suspicious of my ideas. They are downright scared of me. But, they’re just too average—those military men—just too average. But never mind, your friends are tied up here and in three minutes, you’ll be launched into space.”

“Dr Gregstone,” Bob began. “I believe you are the Master of the Universe. You created the whole game.”

“It’s mine, yes. I congratulate you on this realization.” Gregstone stood up and bowed. “*Master of the Universe* is a typical Gregstone invention. Just great!” He glanced around his desk. “I wonder where my toy is,” he muttered.

“Your what?” Bob asked.

“My remote control. I knew something was missing.” He got down on his knees and looked under the swivel chair. “Butch!” he growled. “Help me look for the remote control!”

“No problem, sir.” The big man quickly got down on all fours and joined the scientist.

“Only three minutes left,” Bob said quickly. He saw that Jupiter still had his hands behind his back. By now, Bob had an idea where Gregstone’s remote control was and he had to keep him from looking for it.

“Dr Gregstone, that leaves me with one conclusion—*Master of the Universe* is not just a game, it’s a serious computer program,” Bob said. “Your satellite is a kind of killer satellite that is connected to the Internet game. You are making the game a reality.”

“What difference does it make?” Gregstone stood up. “But that’s just the way it is.”

“You’re a smart lad, Bob,” Gregstone remarked. “It’s a shame you haven’t worked with me before. You should now know that whoever reaches the highest level of the game operates the satellite’s real laser weapon... to shoot at real planes, and other satellites.”

“Two satellites have been destroyed—one American and one Chinese. Damn, Dr Gregstone, that’s real!” Bob exclaimed.

“Yes. This is reality. Or is it a game?” Gregstone rubbed his hands. Now he was in his element. “But what does it matter? It’ll be fantastic! A new reality, and I’m on the verge of it. I’ve brought the satellite up. Everything is interconnected. The first two players have already arrived one level below the highest. And now, of all times, the laser won’t work!” He shouted the last words.

“You’re crazy, Dr Gregstone!” Bob looked at the digital clock. One minute and thirty-two seconds to go. “I hope everything goes well,” he murmured to himself. Then he closed his eyes and waited.

The computer voice was now saying every second out loud: “One twenty-nine... One twenty-eight... One twenty-seven...”

Slowly Bob drew in the air. There was nothing more he could do. He had handled the situation brilliantly the whole time. Now he had to leave it to his fate.

One minute twenty... That stupid voice.

Jupiter felt the bond slowly loosen. Just a few small fibres left, but they were very stubborn. He tore at them, but without success. Why did the rope hold out so long? It had to break eventually.

One minute five seconds... Again a jolt went through the restraint—only not yet the decisive one. Jupiter took a breath. He felt Ramírez and Pete sliding back and forth beside him more and more excitedly. Now was time to stay calm.

Jupiter checked the situation. Bob had fell silent. What he had just found out about Gregstone was great detective work. In addition, the kind of teamwork between The Three Investigators should be rewarded, but in this case, anything was to be expected.

Fifty-five seconds left... Gregstone sat in his seat and waited. He too was restless, tapping his fingers on the tabletop. Probably he missed his remote control, but of course he had no time to search for it now.

Butch has since stood back up, stepped to the window and looked into the launch hall. He was quite a distance away. That’s good, as Jupiter concentrated fully on the restraint.

Thirty seconds...

Finally, the rope broke! Jupiter jumped up at once, but Gregstone turned and saw him. Jupe rushed forward, trying to get past the scientist. It was about three metres to the red button... but he had underestimated Gregstone. Like a snake, the scientist got up from his swivel chair, and rolled it forcefully towards Jupiter to create obstruction.

Twenty-four seconds...

Jupiter grabbed the chair and used it to keep Gregstone at bay for the time being. With all his courage, he tried to fight his way past Gregstone. Now, the red button was barely two metres away.

Jupe charged forward, but Gregstone proved to be very tough.

Eighteen seconds... Seventeen... Sixteen... Fifteen...

Completely surprised, Butch had stood there and watched Jupiter’s attack in amazement. Perhaps he needed some time to sense what was going on.

Fourteen... Thirteen... Twelve...

Now Butch set his muscles in motion.

Eleven seconds...

Now Pete leapt up, ran forward as fast as he could and managed to ram his shoulder into Butch's stomach area. Butch staggered backwards towards the window, but quickly recovered. Meanwhile Ramírez had come to Jupiter's aid. But without free hands he couldn't do much.

Ten... Nine... Eight... Seven... Six... Five... Time was running out like nothing.

Finally, Jupiter managed to break free. With a leap that was astonishing for his weight, he lunged towards the control desk and reached for the flashing red button. But the leap had been too short. He felt Gregstone pull at his arm. He gathered all his strength once more.

The computer voice announced: "Three... Two... One... Take-off!"

At that very instant, with a loud bang, Jupiter's hand struck the red button!

17. One

But Jupiter was too late—only a fraction of a second, but it was too late!

A roar rose, a loud hum, as if a giant dynamo was going off. Everyone stopped their fight. Gregstone stood up triumphantly. Jupiter and Pete did not register his gaze. They stared in horror at the window that seemed to frame Masterplane like a screen.

The space shuttle began to tremble slightly, tugged at its mounts, and seemed to rise a little. Then it was released and it hissed off like an arrow, racing towards the opening in the dome at an ever-increasing speed. Shortly afterwards, it was hurled out into the starry sky. Seconds later, the rocket engines would ignite to take Bob at top speed on his dangerous mission.

Gregstone burst into a maniacal laugh that irritated even Butch. “I’m...” he giggled, “I’m too smart for you all!”

He propped himself on the tabletop. “As you stand there,” he blurted out, “you look as though... you’ve just... suffered the biggest defeat in your lives! Ha ha ha ha ha!” Laughing so hard he almost swallowed his words and his head turned red. “And the most beautiful thing is... it’s true,” he pointed out. “You played into my hands.”

“You’re crazy, Gregstone,” Jupiter said calmly, although he was seething inside. He turned to Butch and said: “Butch, this man is sick. He’s crazy—crazy for power. You keep sticking with him. It’s gonna cost you dearly... Butch, you’re a reasonable man.”

Butch looked at him in a state of uncertainty and Gregstone reacted with another laughing fit—probably his reaction to hearing the words ‘Butch’ and ‘reasonable’ in the same sentence.

Ramírez limped a few steps towards Butch and said to him: “That’s right, Butch. Untie my hands. If you stick with Greg, you’re gonna be in big trouble. Admit it that we didn’t know any of this.”

“Trust Ramírez,” Jupiter said to Butch.

Butch stepped from one foot to the other. He looked at the scientist, whose giggles had subsided. “I don’t know,” Butch said indecisively.

Then Gregstone grabbed the rifle that had been thrown to the ground in the fight. “Butch!” he shouted, pointing the rifle at Jupiter. “Tie them up again!”

Butch took a step back. “Dr Gregstone,” he muttered. “What’s the point?”

“Tie them!” cried Gregstone, “Go on... Tie them up, you fool!”

Helplessly, Butch was very confused and his gaze wandered to Ramírez.

Jupiter seized the moment. He wanted to throw Gregstone off balance for good. “You’re pretty stupid, Dr Gregstone, did you know that? We have fooled you and you don’t even know about it!”

It was a jackpot. Gregstone stared at the First Investigator. The rifle in his hand was shaking. “Say that again!”

“You’re pretty stupid, sir,” Jupiter said calmly. “Pardon my language, but I must describe the state of your brain aptly.” Jupiter smiled broadly. “Sir, I have something important to tell you—I have replaced the computer chip.”

“What computer chip?”

“The one in the brown case that Bob is supposed to take to the satellite.”

“It can’t be!” Gregstone exclaimed.

“Yes.” Jupiter kept his tone in a very matter-of-fact way. “It wasn’t difficult. We found the numbers of the combination lock by chance. You know, 2-0-5-4, because that’s also the code for your security doors here. I watched Butch key it in when he caught us. And before you pushed the boxes down on Pete and me in that storeroom, I had the case opened. That’s when I changed the computer chip. Didn’t you notice that? That was your mistake! Now Bob can’t even get the satellite repaired. It’s all for nothing, Dr Gregstone.”

“No, it can’t be!” Gregstone exclaimed incredulously. “This cannot be true! Where did you get the fake chip?”

“The storeroom, sir. Some of the boxes contained computer chips from the same manufacturer. I opened one of the boxes, grabbed the chip and swapped it with that in the case.”

Gregstone looked nervous all of a sudden. “And where’s the actual chip?” he asked.

“Here, in my back pocket, sir. If you’d like to come over here and see for yourself...”

Gregstone raised the rifle at Jupiter again. “Keep your hands up.”

“Of course!”

And Gregstone walked over, they could see the uncertainty in his face. As expected by Jupiter, the news of the swapping of the computer chip troubled Gregstone so much that he had focussed totally on Jupiter, but not Pete. At a convenient moment, Jupiter winked at his friend and Pete nodded. They waited until Gregstone was close enough.

“Wait, Dr Gregstone, there’s something flashing on the monitor!” Jupiter said without a tremor in his voice.

Gregstone looked around for a moment. As if it had been rehearsed a hundred times, Jupiter knocked the rifle out of the scientist’s hand. At that same moment, Pete leapt forward and rammed his shoulders at the scientist, as what he had done to Butch earlier.

Gregstone fell sideways and rolled on the floor. But before he could stand up, Jupiter had already grabbed the rifle. Pete also pulled himself up despite the shackles on his wrists. Butch watched the event without doing or saying anything.

Jupiter then whispered to the Mexican: “Ramírez, tell Butch to tie Gregstone up... He will listen to you.”

Ramírez nodded. “Tie Greg up, Butch,” he said confidently. “But do it properly.”

Butch only hesitated briefly. The course of events also seemed to prove Jupiter and Ramírez right in his eyes. Slowly he approached Gregstone and tied his hands with more and more determined movements. After that, Butch cut the restraints off Ramírez and Pete, while Jupiter kept his eyes on the scientist.

“You’ve lost, Gregstone,” Jupiter explained. “And you know what? Your paranoia got the better of you. Even after you captured us, it would have been no trouble getting rid of us. But you chose to toy with us too much and took our visit for granted! So you set a trap for yourself.”

Jupiter paused and looked at the monitor. There was no sign of Bob. “But perhaps the story will end less tragically for you than it would for us,” he continued. “All you’ll lose is a satellite. We might lose our friend.”

“Great ideas require sacrifices,” Gregstone said stubbornly.

Jupiter looked at him. “There is still something you can do. Get Bob back down safe and sound.”

Gregstone shook his head. “No. The program is running like clockwork. Bob has to fly the intended route.”

Ramírez stepped in. “Jupiter, maybe I can do something else... although I can’t change the launch phase. I’ve been working on the programming and I have an idea, but I need to check it out on the computer first.” He cleared his throat.

“Are we in contact with Bob right now?” Jupe asked.

“Not during the launch phase. He will hardly get a word out anyway because the push is too strong,” Ramírez replied. “But in two or three minutes, the situation would be different.” He nodded at Jupiter.

“Ramírez!” Gregstone yelled out. “I won’t allow you to tamper with the program. You hear me, Ramírez?”

The Mexican ignore the scientist.

“Butch!” Gregstone continued yelling. “Stop them, Butch!” However, Butch also ignored him. The scientist threw an angry look at his former henchman. “Butch, you’re a total loser,” he said.

“Dr Gregstone, you shouldn’t talk to me like that,” replied Butch, putting his hands on his hips. “I won’t put up with this any longer.”

“You don’t need to, Butch,” Pete added and went over to Gregstone. “I’m going to lock him in the toilet now. He’s a nuisance here.” No one objected. Pete proceeded to escort the scientist out.

At the same time, Ramírez tampered with the computer. Meanwhile Jupiter grabbed the microphone and tried to contact Bob.

“I hope he’s okay,” he murmured. Only now, after Gregstone had been overpowered, a dark wave of shock overtook him that Bob had been launched into space.

“Hello, Bob, come in,” he shouted into the microphone in a trembling voice. “Bob, please, this is Jupe. We have the situation under control down here. Hello, Bob, come in!”

But nobody answered. “Ramírez, why can’t we see Bob on the monitor?” asked the First Investigator. He held on to the edge of the table as if he did not have enough strength to stand.

Ramírez looked up from the monitors. “It must be something to do with the launch phase,” he murmured. “Actually, the sound and vision should have been back by now. Don’t worry, Jupiter, it will come back soon.” He sat there, put his head in his hands and thought.

Jupiter, too, forced himself to regain his composure, although he was seriously worried about Bob. “You are right. No rush. I’ll keep reaching out to Bob... Hello, Bob, please respond!”

When Pete reappeared after a few minutes, Jupiter had still not succeeded.

“How is it?” Pete asked, although the sight of Jupe’s face told him everything.

“Nothing,” Jupe said with disappointment. “Bob, Jupe here, come in!” Enervated, Jupiter handed the microphone to Pete. “Here, Pete, take over.”

Pete sat down at the microphone. “How far along is he?” he asked Ramírez, who was still busy with the computer.

Without looking up, the Mexican replied: “If all goes well, he is now flying in zero gravity... at least that’s what the computer says.” He studied some control instruments. “Look, I can show you on the simulation.” A picture came up and Pete saw an artificially generated image of the space shuttle gliding through the atmosphere.

“But how would this help us?” Pete called out, but he faltered.

“Be patient,” said Jupiter.

Suddenly the loudspeaker hissed and out came Bob’s voice: “Hello, fellas. I’m back. I could hear most of what happened down there, but I couldn’t respond because I feel nauseous—really sick.” Despite some interference, Bob’s message came through very clear.

They looked at each other with relief. "Bob, man, old boy!" Jupiter cheered.

Pete also exclaimed: "You're back! Tell me, are you okay?"

"Well, like I said, I feel sick," Bob replied. "I can't remember which end is up. But everything else is really wonderful. What's going to happen now?"

Jupiter did not answer and directed a questioning glance at Ramírez. The Mexican nodded. "You are about to go into orbit," he said into the microphone. "That will give you a real jolt. Then we'll see."

"And how long will it take to get to the satellite?" Bob asked. "And more importantly, what's waiting for me there?"

Jupiter thought briefly and then said: "No good. It would be best if you didn't go near it at all."

"Is it about the faulty laser weapon?" Bob wondered.

"You said it, Bob," Jupe said. "It's shooting around uncontrollably. You've already know what happened to the American and Chinese satellites."

Bob remained silent in dismay.

Then Ramírez intervened in the conversation. "That's right, unfortunately. And the flight is programmed to go to the satellite. I still don't know how to change the route, but I have an idea what else I can do... Bob, when we were trapped in the tunnel, you didn't let me down, and I won't either."

"Thank you, Ramírez. But you understand that none of this is making me feel any better. How long do I have?"

"You have about half an hour," Ramírez said. "But calm down, Bob. I'm working on it."

"I can't stand another countdown again!" Bob exclaimed.

Since communications was re-established with Bob, Jupiter was in control of himself again. Now, he had to calm Bob. "The best thing is to look at the earth... It must look great from up there."

"It does... if only I could enjoy it," Bob replied. "It's all blue... Wonderful... Guess that's the Pacific. It's a little too far for me to jump in."

"300 kilometres," Ramírez said without looking up from his instruments.

"What have you done with Gregstone?" Bob wanted to know.

Now it was Pete's turn to say something. "He's in the toilet, all tied up," he said, not without a certain pride in his voice. "We overpowered him."

"Great. What about Butch? Did you also tie up the muscle man?"

Pete coughed. "Butch was intelligent enough to realize that Dr Gregstone was a madman. Now he is on our side." Pete glanced cautiously at his former guard, but Butch did not react.

"Congratulations," Bob said. "Wait a moment..."

"What is it?" Jupiter asked worriedly.

"The shuttle is shaking up pretty bad."

Ramírez pushed the talk button. "You are now in orbit," he said. "If you want, you can unbuckle your seat belt and enjoy zero gravity..."

Suddenly something happened.

"Bob!" exclaimed Ramírez. He stared spellbound at one of the screens where some text was running through. "I think—" he paused.

Jupiter and Pete looked at him startled. But Ramírez beamed. "I... I managed to get the satellite to destroy itself! Good news, Bob, you're safe from it now. We'll get you down somehow."

"The laser can no longer endanger Bob?" Jupiter asked in astonishment.

Ramírez shook his head. “No,” he said. “The satellite, along with the laser weapon, is destroyed. As we already know, the laser weapon malfunctioned, so I tried to program something for it to destroy itself, and it worked!”

“Wonderful!” Jupiter remarked. “At least it will not do any more harm!”

The mood in the Control Room rose.

“Now I can start the landing process. It will commence in about fifty minutes. By then Bob would have flown once around the world,” Ramírez said.

“There you are, old boy,” Jupe cried in relief and he turned to Pete and said: “This guy is about to fly around the world in a space shuttle...”

“I’ve just checked the programs and they are in order,” Ramírez said.

“Thank you, Ramírez!” Jupe said, “Without you, Bob might be lost in space.”

“But one thing I’ve gotta hand to you,” the Mexican said, “The exchange of the chip was a brilliant idea.”

“I didn’t exchange it at all.” Jupiter had to laugh when he saw Ramírez’s incredulous face.

“But you said...”

“When Gregstone gave Bob the 2-0-5-4 combination code, he was just confirming my suspicions. I had already seen this sequence of numbers that Butch used. With this connection, I gave Gregstone a credible explanation that I knew the code by accident. About the computer chip, well, I saw some boxes in the storeroom with the name of a computer company on them. So I figured it out pretty quickly. It was all a trick that even a clever man like Dr Gregstone fell for. All I have to do is to hit him at a sore spot.”

“What’s that?” asked Butch, who had followed the conversation with interest.

“His paranoia,” Jupiter said.

Butch nodded, but there was something from his gaze that he didn’t quite understand Jupiter’s remark.

“If you tell him straight out that he’s stupid, he’ll freak out,” Pete explained in a slightly annoyed voice. “Get it, Butch?”

“Sure,” Butch said. “No problem.”

“Come on, Pete, let’s get a drink,” Jupe said. “The adventure is about to be over. We’ll toast to that... Maybe a juice, a Coke, or whatever... I’m so thirsty.”

“No more Coke,” Butch suddenly spoke up again. “But soda’s no problem.”

“Well, fine with us!” Pete said as Butch went out of the Control Room.

Only Bob was dissatisfied. “Hey! You’re celebrating, but I’m nowhere near down. I’d like a drink too.”

“We still have the tap water under the bunk beds,” joked Pete. “We’ll save that for you.”

“Ha, ha, ha—” Bob replied, but suddenly the connection broke off.

Only a hissing sound could be heard. The screen flickered, and the image from inside the space shuttle disappeared!

18. Two

“Ramírez, what happened?” Jupiter asked, horrified. His high spirits were instantly blown away.

Ramírez shrugged his shoulders. “If I only knew... I hope nothing gets out of control.”

“I thought everything was under control...” Pete wondered.

Ramírez scratched his head. “Well, something can always go wrong. The space shuttle can get hit by space junk. You know, particles from previous satellites still orbiting around... or a meteorite.”

Jupiter turned pale. “But what does the computer say?”

Ramírez was already exploring various options. “Actually, everything still seems to be working,” he said. “The computer is still tracking the shuttle, no alarms...”

Pete had a bad hunch. “I’ll see if Gregstone’s still locked up,” he said. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

At the door, he collided with Butch who was waving four bottles of lemonade in his hands. “Let’s get this party started,” he shouted happily. Astonished, he noticed the horrified faces. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

“At this moment, there’s no contact with Bob,” Ramírez explained. “And we don’t know what the problem is.”

“Maybe he’s in trouble,” Butch said, worried.

“Oh, yeah? I need to check on something!” In a hurry, Pete left the Control Room. But after a few seconds, he was back.

“Gregstone’s gone!” he declared soundlessly. “He broke free from the toilet and is prowling about somewhere. I have no idea where.” He went over to Jupiter, who was still at the control desk. “Well, what about Bob?”

“No contact yet,” replied Jupiter. “I wonder if Gregstone is behind this.” He grabbed the rifle leaning against the wall. “Just in case,” he said. “We can expect anything from the scientist.”

“Yes...” Ramírez looked at him thoughtfully. “But the computer can only be operated from here... or maybe...” He hesitated. “The computer in the cafeteria, that’s where he installed his *Master of the Universe* game!”

“Well, I’ll go check it out,” cried Pete. “Give me the rifle, Juve! If he comes between my fingers again...”

After Pete had disappeared, for a while, only the soft murmur from the loudspeaker could be heard. There was an oppressive silence. Jupiter quietly worked on his lower lip while Ramírez stared expressionlessly at his control instruments.

Then suddenly the loudspeaker cracked.

“Bob?” Juve said into the microphone.

“Yes, Juve?”

“It’s you? It’s... your voice! Why was it so sudden... Is everything okay?”

“Sure, Juve. I feel great! Really. I had only switched off the microphone and picture so that I could finally enjoy the wonderful flight in peace. Since I’m in space... the

weightlessness and the view of the earth—it's really beautiful from up here. It's really great, Jupe... It's really great!"

The First Investigator was at a loss for words. "You... you should have told us," he finally said. "You scared the pants off us."

"I wanted to give you a little thrill," Bob quipped. "Since you keep sending me from one disaster to another..."

Jupiter swallowed. In fact, he had a guilty conscience. "Yes, Bob, I apologize to you."

"Okay. Now, can you heroes please make sure that I get back down safe and sound? I think it's really nice up here, but I don't want to be a piece of your uncle's junk after I land!"

Ramírez laughed. "Take it easy, Bob. I thought Greg gave us some problems, but now almost nothing can go wrong. We'll get you down nice and easy."

The dried-up salt lake was still in the shade. It would not be long before the morning sun flooded it with its warm light. The first rays from the sun had just fallen over the sand dunes on the horizon and had already bathed the small mountain range in bright light. The temperatures were still very pleasant, almost a little cool, but the fast rising sun already gave a hint that it would be a very hot desert day again.

Jupiter and Pete had left the underground facility through a secret gate that Butch had opened for them. Ramírez, on the other hand, had stayed in the Control Room to supervise Bob's landing.

Now the two detectives were standing tense on the dry ground, a bit away from the dilapidated concrete building that had led them into their adventure the night before.

Focussed, Jupiter searched the horizon with his eyes, looking for the shuttle. "Still nothing," he murmured. "I wonder where Gregstone is. Let's hope he's not up to more tricks."

Pete had put his hand to his forehead and blinked into the sun. "Luckily Ramírez locked himself in the Control Room, or else he'd be in for a nasty surprise."

"I think that's Bob's shuttle," Jupiter said and pointed to the sky. In fact, a small dot was visible, which soon grew larger until the two detectives could finally make out the spacecraft. It was already flying very low and was directly heading for the dried-up salt lake.

"I can't wait for Bob to get down safely," Pete said. "Nothing should go wrong now."

"Ramírez is helping him and Bob's computer game experience will also come in handy with the controls," replied Jupiter.

They saw the space shuttle approach. The air was still, and they could clearly hear the engine.

"There, look! He's about to land... rear tyres first, perfect!" Jupe commented. "It's blowing up a lot of sand..."

Finally, the space shuttle touched down very smoothly.

"He's done it, Jupe!" Pete exclaimed. "He's done it!"

The space shuttle rolled out and came to a halt a few hundred metres away.

"A landing without problems," Butch commented dryly and turned away. "I'm gonna go get the Jeep so that we can get out of here."

The hatch opened and Jupiter and Pete ran towards it. A few minutes later, they greeted their friend back to earth with cheers.

"Bob's ahead of us now," Pete said to Jupiter. "He is the only one of us who has ventured into space!"

They had hooked Bob into their midst, as his step was still rather unsteady. Together, they went towards the Jeep that Butch had driven out to the front of the building.

"In a few years every travel agency will offer this," Jupiter said. "Then we'll get our chance."

The balance problems almost made Bob stumble over his own feet. "But you should approach such a trip a little less spontaneous than I did," Bob said. "I must have aged years because of the excitement. Look, here comes Ramírez!"

In the meantime, the Mexican had come out of the underground facility and hurried towards The Three Investigators. He had overheard Bob's remark. "Actually, you age more slowly in space," he said with a smile. Then he congratulated Bob on his safe return. Bob thanked the Mexican on a job well done.

Jupiter, however, was already calculating as he pinched his lower lip. "True, Ramírez, it's the so-called twin paradox. Einstein figured it out. It's because of the speed and leaving Earth's gravitational field."

Ramírez looked at him in amazement, but Pete and Bob knew their friend better. It was clear to them that Jupiter would soon proudly announce how much younger Bob got.

"Well, Bob, you went round the earth, and that was what it was all about..." Pete said.

"Well... yes, and the speed... well, in that time, you should have aged about 2.12 microseconds less than us!" Cleverly Jupiter looked at the others.

"That's not too bad, is it?" Bob laughed. "2.12 microseconds? Wonderful!" He frowned. "Well, I don't think that's enough to compensate for all the stress."

Pete looked at Bob critically from top to bottom and then quipped: "From the way you look now, that's definitely not enough!"

"Idiot!" Bob punched him in the ribs.

At that moment, they were interrupted by a loud roar. Startled, the boys turned around. They saw the space shuttle move, turn slowly and set course for the dried-up salt lake.

"Gregstone," Ramírez said tonelessly. "He sneaked into the shuttle, and he's getting away. Guess there's enough fuel to take him quite a distance."

The engines roared off and the spacecraft took off.

"I can't wait to see what the scientist comes up with next to satisfy his megalomania," Pete commented.

"For now, I think his worst teeth have been pulled out," Jupiter quipped.

"It's not our problem now anyway," cried Butch. "Let's get out of here!"

The Three Investigators got into the Jeep. Ramírez wedged himself in the back seat between Pete and Bob. Butch turned the ignition key and drove off. "We'll pick up your broken-down car later. Now we're going back to civilization and to the beach!"

"I thought we were supposed to go to the science fiction movie festival," Pete joked.

Still dazed, Bob mumbled: "You two can go... What I had just experienced can never be topped by a science fiction movie!"

"... Or a computer game!" Jupiter laughed.

The door to the headquarters of The Three Investigators opened and Juve entered. He was carrying a bag in his hands. "Five ice creams!" he cried happily. "I got them from Aunt Mathilda. One for each of us."

Jupiter smiled and waited until everyone else had chosen their treat, then he unwrapped his. "Hmm, vanilla," he said, holding it up.

"I've got raspberry!" Butch fell on one of the chairs with a thud.

“No problem, sir.” Jupiter licked slowly.

“So Ramírez, what are you going to do now?” Bob asked the Mexican.

“Does anyone know a good job for me?” Ramírez wondered.

“Recently I heard that a movie studio is looking for a software specialist for special effects,” Pete recalled. “I’ll ask my dad!”

“Great!” Ramírez remarked. “Perhaps I should only involve myself with space shuttles that fly on the movie screen!”

Just then, Jupiter took out the latest copy of *Rocky Beach News* and showed them the front page. “So listen,” he said. Eagerly, all eyes and ears were on him.

And slowly, in between licks of ice cream, Jupiter began to read aloud:

SATELLITE CRISIS—PRODUCT OF A MAD SPACECRAFT BUILDER?

Rocky Beach, California. Three boys calling themselves ‘The Three Investigators’ have caused some confusion by claiming that the missing American and Chinese satellites were shot down by a crazy spacecraft builder. A spokesman for the Department of Defence said that everything would be examined carefully, but at the moment, this was probably the overheated imagination of the three teenagers. Our correspondent in Rocky Beach, Mel Roberts, however, has had The Three Investigators tell him the whole story. Our readers will find it exclusively on page 7 under the heading ‘The Mystery of the Space Shuttle Mission’.